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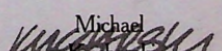
To many fans of the Amber Diceless Roleplaying game, the images that I created for the gamebook are the visual personifications of the characters. For those of you who have graced me with that accolade, I thank you. It was my intention to create something that might be accepted universally, and to do so I tried to get into the mind of the characters and Dworkin, the artist who created their Trumps.

In November of 2002, my oldest friend Shaun Hoadley returned to Detroit after an absence of seventeen years. I gifted him with, among many other things, a copy of *Amberzine* #11. Reading the issue before he left town, he reminded me of a loss to metropolitan Detroit's art and teaching community: one of our college art professors had just passed away, Leo Dworkin. It had been so long ago, that I had forgotten those classes, and his name. So maybe my artistic vision of Amber isn't so amazing after all—I was taught by Dworkin. Unfortunately, like Corwin, I wasn't one of the redheads, one of the better students, my trumps are neither warm nor cold to the touch and only take you away if YOUR imagination wills it.

Again, I would like to thank Erick Wujcik for allowing me to do this a second time after making the many errors that I did make last time. My only defense, poor as it is, is that I work in images, not words. I would also like to thank Pierre-Alexandre Sicart not only for all his enthusiasm and work but for his friendship and for being the sort of assistant all editors wished they had.

This time I dedicate this issue to Coner and Phelon; I wish I could be there to open the world of words and images for you as it was opened for me.



Amberzine

AMBER PRINTS *by* Michael Kucharski

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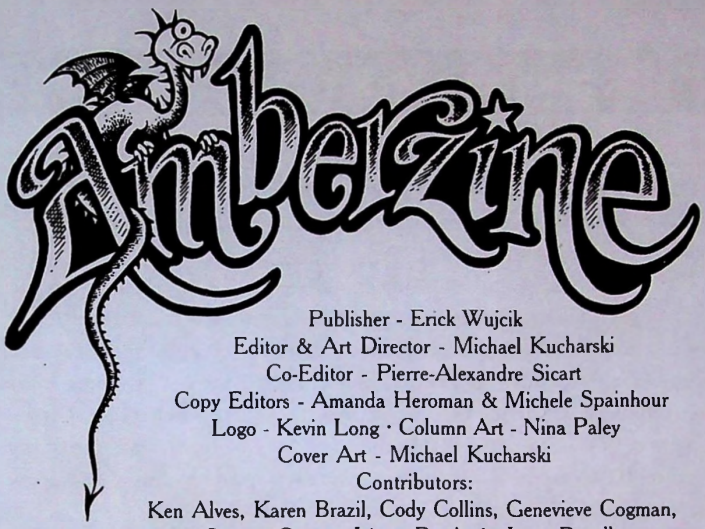

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Amberzine #12 by P.-A. Sicart

I wanted Michael Kucharski to draw Pierce. I mean, I *wanted* it. For that purpose, I needed to provide him with a story he would deem worth publishing, worth illustrating, and then I needed *Amberzine* #12 to become more than a mere idea.

Flashback: GenCon 2001. Erick invited me to take part, for the second year in a row, in his (quite insane) Quantum Time game. He fed me hot home-made cookies, he lodged me, he treated me as if I were some kind of exiled royalty—no, better, as if I were not the near-stranger I was but actually a close friend—and he presented me to Michael Kucharski. The very guy whose artwork introduced me to what is still, as a player, my favorite RPG ever. During the game, he drew me a Dworkin (now at my parents' place in France) and we kept in touch.

December 2001. Between Christmas and the New Year, I write the first version of "Fors l'Honneur." Mike likes it. My Machiavellian plan is unfolding. Only, too slowly. *Amberzine* needs more quality stories or the next issue won't see the light of day… let's face it, in my lifetime. So I offer to lend a hand, by doing what I do best: finding other people to do the work.

December 2003. I write a call for stories and spread it around the Web. We do receive stories. Lots of stories. Hundreds after hundreds of sheets of paper, according to my printer. Erick decides to bump *Amberzine* from 160 to 512 pages. Even then, we know we'll have to reject many a good tale. Those we select have to be edited and illustrated (go look at Pierce, p. 9!), and yes, since we've been doing that on our free time yet wouldn't settle but for the best we could achieve… it took us a whole year, even more. But now it's here, it's ready, and begging for you to start reading beyond this boring editorial… so what are you waiting for?

Let the play begin.

Fors l'Honneur

By Pierre-Alexandre Sicart
Illustrated by Michael Kucharski

With a cup of wine for 林駿,
guardian of the peach garden.

"Why here? Why not in Amber?"

"It is Amber."

"I mean, why not in the *castle*?"

"There is a castle. Why do you always have to be so tiresome? You've asked for this day. Besought me, besieged me, been a breathing hassle… It has come. And it'll be gone, if you can't make up your mind; you don't have all night."

"Thanks, father." I set foot on the first stone step, paused. Glanced back. "Where shall I meet you?"

"I'll still be around in the morning." With a sigh, he had made his seat of a nearby rock. He was not looking in my direction anymore, but down there on Amber, the city gleaming faintly amongst the shadows of the night.

With a sigh equal to his, I put my foot on the third step, then on the next, which was not made of stone but shimmered like starlight. Through it, I could see the sea. Way, way below me. With a slight gulp, I raised my head, focusing on my destination: Tir-na Nog'th.

The city in the sky wavered like a dream, slowly taking a more definite shape as I was approaching. When, at long last, I had reached the last step, I was the one vacillating, no longer the landscape.

The city was as still as it was silent. Not a soul in the streets, not even a ghost. I walked past the main arch, each of my steps echoing like the

breaking of a glass, walked along buildings oftentimes familiar, eerily so in their quiet.

There was no reason for me to linger. Still walking but faster, I soon reached the precincts of the palace. Magnified in the all-pervading stillness, the stately building seemed intent on invading the sky, pocketing the moon and swallowing the stars.

In the absence of guards saluting as I passed the tall gates and ascended the large marble stairway, I felt like an intruder in this reflection of my ancestral home. It was almost subdued that I drew near the entrance. The imposing double door was not closed, and I could see expanding in front of me the vast ceremonial hall, studded with columns of porphyry, designed in such a way that from any position, the eye was driven to the back wall. To the throne.

By the Blood! Was I a calf to be so easily cowed? With a burst of irritation, I entered the large room. I had not taken three steps when the lighting began to decline, as the huge doors were closing behind me, seemingly of their own volition. I barely had time to twist round before they slammed on the last ray of moonlight. In perfect silence.

All the time straining my ears, I launched on a quest for lighter and lantern. I was still rummaging through my pack when I realized it was no longer so dark. No longer so silent either. All

around me whispers were dancing, soon followed by a rustling of silk and satin, and the twirling hints of a melody.

When I raised my head, I found it lost amidst the countless masks of a very colorful ball. Luckily, before I could gape and look foolish, a hand had seized mine and I was now dancing, to a tune which had turned distinct and wild.

My partner had changed four or five times before I could get a grip, gather myself, still my mind. My body was still lost in the dance, as was everything around me, including the many hues bringing light to the hall.

Only then did I notice, just before my eyes, the long beak of a bird of paradise. Its huge feathered head was poised on the delicate shoulders of a most shapely maiden; the sight deserved a smile. At that point, I may have begun to relax, had not a hand seized my shoulder, callously pulling me out of the more pleasant hold of my feathery partner.

The owner of the hand wore no mask, but for one of intense suspicion. "Corwin was an illusion. But you're real, aren't you? Who are you?" This saying, he had unsheathed his sword. The blade had left its dark green scabbard with a hiss and a trail of smoke; it was now pointed at my throat. Two thirds of its length were covered with part of a motif which I had been given to see but on a couple of occasions—yet would never forget. There was no mistaking it: the Day Sword, Werewindle, burning blade of the Pattern.

In this warlike family of mine, Brand was not numbered amongst the best swordsmen; still, he was my elder, by a few centuries and a couple more, and as confident as I had grown in my own skill, I hardly felt like facing him. Only, I hoped he would leave that choice to me... not to that fuming, hissing, nasty-looking toothpick of his.

"Who are you?" It was obvious by the steel-coldness of his voice that he did not intend to ask the question a third time. Was I going to admit I was a youngster, thus no threat to him? Or more likely, an easy target... He did not look so thrilled to see me here. What was *he* doing here? Amongst the children of Clarissa, my father professed a special distrust for "that moody dog."

The time had come to provide an answer. Plucking up all my courage, I decided to act as a true Amberite would. I lied. "Have you become so

daft, brother, that you will not recognize me?" Having taken a step backward, I was slowly unsheathing my own blade, a silvery shadow of my father's. Scary how I could imitate his scathing tone, too. Reading my opponent's stance, I had figured out he was not ready yet to make his move. Still, the multihued lighting was confusing; I failed to discern if the redhead's surprise held a tinge of fear or not, or at least of wariness.

"Brother? I thought you had let your beard grow?" Speaking so, he had let his sword drop. Slightly. The point now aimed at my heart. With as much nonchalance as a flick of the wrist can convey, I let my blade stroke his, gently pushing it out of the way. The blasted redhead was not backing down.

Something fell between us. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a long beak twirling amidst colorful feathers. As the gaudy mask touched the floor, sullen silence had reasserted its hold on the vast hall. The costumed crowd had not vanished; once lost in relentless motion, it was now frozen, each hidden face turned in our direction. I could feel their stare, like a pressure, countless eyes fixed upon us through slits like loopholes.

Steps resounded on the marble floor. Still clad in feathers save for the head, the maiden who had been my dancing partner came to stand close to her mask, her fingers alight above the crossing blades. She was facing Brand, who finally pulled back his sword, in one slow coiling motion. "I see." His gaze fell back on me. "It would seem you are indeed whom you claimed to be. One version or another." He had sheathed Werewindle; suddenly, his face broke into a grin and... he was no longer there.

I had enough control to hide my relief. Sliding back my rapier into its scabbard, I smiled at my hardy savior as she turned to face me.

I cannot swear I had enough restraint to conceal my delight, as she was not only bold but beautiful as a fairy. Her long silky black hair was in sharp contrast to her face very pale; her gentle smile, to eyes large and proud, a mirror for Arden's green. She had extended her hand for me to kiss, which I did with reverence. Her fingers were cool and her touch soft, without a hint of frailty.

Around us, the colorful crowd had reorganized, forming a guard of honor, clearing a path for us to walk. Which we did, up to the high throne, on which I had her seated before realizing the nature of such a seat, its

meaning in such a place.

It didn't matter, at that very moment. I sat nearby on a protruding rock. The place had changed. We were still in the main hall of Amber's palace, but it was as if Arden had invaded: trees had sprung from the marble floor; the complex tapestry of their leaves hid the ceiling; a subtle mist had arisen, suffusing the place with tender light. And on her throne of stone and moss, the fairy queen was smiling. At me.

I am unable to remember the content of the conversation we had, though I would say it was utterly charming, and rather lengthy. Chances are, I was led to tell much more than is wise. Before us, the ball was still swirling with frantic delight, amongst the gleaming trees and the columns of porphyry. The participants were not all costumed, and it slowly dawned on me that none was even remotely human. With the notable exception of their exquisite sovereign.

I was not keen on considering the possibility of her smile being yet another disguise, if more clever than any other. All the more since she had offered me her hand again and we were presently dancing very close. When finally we escaped the fey carnival, through a stairway hidden behind her mossy throne, I had completely forgotten about my doubts, as I had forgotten about where I was, and why, half an eternity before that.

The secret passage led to a vast bedchamber, richly furnished in shades of green and gold. The proportions of the place were such as to be intimidating, at least for me; my fairy queen was not so easily daunted, who daintily drew me toward a four-poster bed. The thing itself was huge, the size of a little room, but with the velvet canopy lowered around us, intimacy became a possibility, and in a heartbeat, a reality.

What was shared within the satin folds of green, I shall not discuss in detail. Enough to say, I had not felt such a surge of pleasure since one of my aunts had taught me the art—a fine art if there is any, which I had since practiced heartily, soon rather sure I could be called a master. Was I wrong! My fairy was the artist; her delicacy concealed surprising strength, the dance of her embrace was a circle of magic.

Many years may have passed then, in tender assaults, hearty ripostes, repeated games of cloud and rain. I was unaware. The caress of her lips erased all memory. Maybe I would still be there now, forever lost in her

dreams, had not the rumble of a storm suddenly broken into our intimacy. Thunder and screams, and a powerful voice I could not help but recognize.

Without a second thought, I had jerked out of bed. Stark naked, I ran to a French window on the opposite wall, to search for sights of the battle.

I did not have to look too far: the main scene was taking place but a few floors below, nearly right under the balcony whose rail I was gripping. On the stairs leading through the tall gates of the castle, a war was coming to an end. The last defenders had gathered around their sovereign, a crowned figure in black and red, the Jewel pulsing on his chest.

"Father!"

The king fell before my eyes. I barely noticed a blur of black and silver rushing to his side, I had already grabbed my rapier by its scabbard in my run for the door.

In front of it stood my queen. Her arms were extended; tears filled her eyes. She shook her head, slowly, "It does not happen now. It does not happen here!"

I shoved her aside. Her hand on my wrist was no longer cool, but cold. Her grip was firm. I faced her, "Not now? Not here? Where, then? In front of the castle? Of the *true* castle? When? It *will* happen, will it not?... What am I doing here? I must tell father." With a twist of the hand, I freed my wrist, to race down the corridor. I heard her voice behind me, eerily clear in the clamor which had invaded my head: "Pierce!... He knows."

Did he? Had my father seen what I had seen? Why then? Why the throne? Why not leave it to Bleys, if not to Corwin? Why did it matter so much? In my haste, I had forgotten about the secret passage, I was scrambling down the main inner stairway. Immense in its silence regained, the hall was deserted. Not a tree left, but leaves on the floor and bright feathers and cotillions. Streamers coiled themselves around my naked ankles as I ran to reach the main doors. Closed!

The tall windows were sealed, blind. I was a prisoner. Beyond the sturdy walls, I could hear the storm still raging, more screams, and even bursts of a sound which had nothing to do with Amber: gunfire. I added my shouts to the tumult, in vain. With a last roar, I shoved myself from the door. There were other exits.

All sealed. No opening leading to the outside, none left. I had half a mind to try and find my way back to the green-and-gold bedchamber, to see if the overlooking window was still there with its balcony for me to step over, when suddenly... it came back to me. I had come here for that, and *that* would not have disappeared.

Breathing harder, I had to find my way to a doorstep I had passed only twice in my life—in a castle of which this one was but a distorted echo. It was a miracle that I could remember, and another that the very nature of the place did not render the fact irrelevant. A miracle that I would soon come to curse.

The door was shut, but this smaller one I could kick open. Then came the torture of having to scurry down the long spiraling stairs, precious time flying away before me. At last, ground level. No time to catch my breath. Was it the seventh corridor? Still no one. The door! There was no mistaking it. Massive, studded with metal... and hanging from a hook on the wall, its key. This I snatched, stuffed into the lock, turned, with my shoulder pushing the heavy door open.

On the universe. It opened on the whole universe, mapped in blue-white radiance, so close to me I had to shield my eyes. After a run through the dark, the sight of the Pattern was like an explosion. A frozen Big Bang. Slowly accommodating, I took a few steps toward the shimmering symbol of what Amber stood for. Of what made my father a prince, a future king, and of myself soon...

"You are not Eric."

Jerking my rapier in front of me, scabbard included, I twisted round, facing the voice. Brand was standing there, shoulders against the wall, two steps to the right of the open door.

Not otherwise moving, he smiled: "I've seen my brother as you are now." A very cold smile. "Naked. There was a time when we didn't hate each other so much that a common jaunt to the beach was unthinkable. Moreover..." With a twitch of the shoulders, he dissociated himself from the wall, taking a few dancing steps in my approximate direction. "Moreover, my brother has walked the Pattern and, though you do have the potential, you are in that respect a virgin."

He paused, at a blade distance of me. "So, you are not him. You

are definitely of the Blood, though, and you have guts, so I may let you live. Of course, you still have to answer my question." Slowly, he was unsheathing his sword. "Who are you?"

It was stupid but, at that very moment, I did not feel like answering. With a sudden flick of the wrist, I freed my rapier, letting the scabbard fly at my flaming uncle's head. He parried as easily as I would have thought, which let him open for an all-out attack, that I hoped would take him by surprise.

It did. Admittedly, not enough to score, but I did not expect that much. As he was half-parrying half-dodging my charge, I dropped down slightly; passing him, I sprang up sideways, connecting with his armpit, projecting him in the direction of the Pattern. He *was* going to step on it, but instead...

"Here." The bastard had disappeared, then reappeared just behind me. In a desperate reflex, I hurled my rapier along a wide protective arc—which came to an early end in a burning clash. I staggered back. The impact had sent shivers of pain right through my shoulder; Brand was smiling. "Naked man, naked blade." Mine lay on the floor, severed close to a hilt whose silvery shine I was still brandishing.

With a yank of the Day Sword, the redhead nicely got me rid of that last excuse for a weapon. "Broken blade..." I did not wait for the closing sentence. There was no balancing between keeping up appearances and preserving my life, if only for a few moments more. I was scampering away. I heard a laugh, then silence, then a laugh again, right in front of me.

I veered toward the Pattern, which I found myself dangerously close to. It looked as if my uncle had every intention of making me suffer the fate I had had in mind for him. It was my luck really that I had to face some esthete who had a taste for irony.

"Checkmate." He had cornered me. I was so close to the Pattern, I could feel its energy creeping up my spine. The look of wariness and longing I gave it would have broken another heart than a redhead's. Brand was still laughing. More and more like a maniac. I slipped into a sliding motion, one slow sidestep following the other.

Playful as ever, he was shadowing my shuffling. I had a plan, though. If you could call that last crazy desperate idea that had crossed my mind "a

plan." I had to reach a certain spot... and... Suddenly, the redhead was not laughing anymore. His blade came into position and this time, I was sure, there would be no more taunting. No other chance.

I jumped. Sideways, twisting my body in mid-air, careful to land on my feet. Right on the Pattern. On the right spot.

I was alive. Precisely, I was at the "entry" of the cosmic diagram, as my father had once pointed it out. I had to walk. There was no lingering on the Pattern. No taking a break and drawing breath, if you had any wish to draw breath ever again.

Brand's laughter echoed behind my back. "Nice hop, I concede. Some bunny blood then, eh? Alas, you made a slight miscalculation... Can't you see? No, of course, you're most impolitely turning your back to me. But you'll see me again, soon enough. And from very close too. Because... you'll have to walk the whole design, you know that? Which means that, at some point, if you don't falter before, you'll have to follow the outer line."

His voice was that of an excited child. One asking to be spanked out of his pants. I was certainly not in a position to make good the threat, though, so I shut up. He, did not. "Ah?... Yes, I can see you heard me. Just a push. A gentle shove, nearly a caress, that's all it'll take. Then you'll fall. Then you'll die."

The red rat was right. I had been foolish. As if he had spoilt me for choice! But... whatever, it was no longer my problem. Or not yet. Before he would be a threat again, before I would have to walk the outer line, I had to pass the first veil, maybe the second. I had to focus on that. Or my beloved uncle would not even need to give me that gentle shove of his.

Just walking was not yet a trial, only a chore. Each step had to be pushed to the ground, but the resistance was not great. Sparks were flying alright, but they were no disturbance, only licking my ankles, not even reaching the knees.

They were actually quite pleasant to the eye. My ears, on the other hand, were enduring torture. "Of course, you were fated to die." And such delight in his voice... "But, would you have answered my question courteously, it would have been faster, quieter. Oh, but, am I not the foolish one, now. Certainly, you're a bastard of Eric's, thus a sucker for a big show?

Ain't it right? Well, I can tell you, you won't be disappointed. I have seen kinsfolk fall on the Pattern before. You will go out with a bang!"

Someone. Make. Him. Shut. Up. I could feel I was nearing the first veil, as the resistance offered by the sparks, or whatever it was that offered resistance, had suddenly accrued. "Next time, I'll remember to bring a crossbow. Or I could go and fetch one now. But no, why bother? You'll be mine soon enough."

Didn't he need to catch his breath, ever? "So Eric is your father, that's decided. Who's the mum, though? I can imagine a woman being attracted by his good looks, but where could he find one that his posturing didn't scare away long before he could bed her? Unless his mum is also yours? What of that? It would explain why she protected your butt. And I who thought she was dead... But, ah, maybe she is."

I was no longer listening. I had reached the first threshold. I could not keep in mind his obscene blathering, nor would I have tried. My will was focused on pushing and pulling my naked body through a wall that I could have sworn was made of moist clay. Moist with sparks, thick and sticky. Surging light was reaching to my thighs, to my hips, nearly to my elbows when I finally fell past the veil.

I had to force myself, having recovered my balance, to draw another step, one more on the trail of light. I could barely see it anymore, lost as it was amongst the flowering sparks and, now, visions that assailed me.

Visions and, should I add, sounds, and scents, feelings... so real I had to give myself a scolding so I would keep to the safe path. I did not try to keep the memories at bay, though: I knew it would require so much effort that I would forget about the task at hand, just as surely as if I let myself drown in the fascinating movie of my past. Boy, where I was born, when something like that happens, it means you're about to kick the bucket!

I kicked through the sparks. One step added. Paris in May. My birth. Dad, always away. Aunty, distant. Nursemaids. Tutors. Childhood, petty games. New York. Adolescence, violence, confusion, pretty maids. One step more. My aunt, no longer so distant, not always so. San Francisco. Amber. Amber!

It was like trudging through the very flow of time, against it sometimes and sometimes in accord, yet never at the same pace, each step

a hard-won victory against oblivion. Each motion was an assertion of the self—as a sum of past experiences, but more than that, as the will which had reflected those experiences and reflected on them, empowering each with meaning, erecting Pierce stone after stone.

Step by step, I was making my way. I was nearing the second veil when, beyond the thin curtain of flying sparks which now fused in front of my eyes, I caught a glimpse of a silhouette. Treading toward me.

Only then did I remember about Brand. But it was not Brand. It was... Or she was... It was hard to say. Sometimes, she looked human and all, and sometimes she had horns and scales and dragon wings, as in a real bad hair day. She was walking the Pattern too but, though she was obviously going through the same kind of ordeal I was experiencing, no spark was flowing from her feet. She had not yet reached the first veil; she was walking a line nearly parallel to the one I was presently following; soon, we would pass face to face.

She did. Without a glance in my direction. I had half a mind to feel somewhat offended, when I hit the second veil. I nearly fell, backward. This one had taken me by surprise. I fought to regain my focus. Visions of my past which had been flowing all around seemed to have crashed against a dike, only to fall back on me, in one powerful wave of memory.

I gasped for air and plunged, deep into a storm of hallucinations and sparks, blue-white foam splashing against my naked form. On the nape of my neck, I could feel my hair raising; then all sensations were lost but for the pressure of the deep, the feeling of drowning, the fear, suffocating. When suddenly I reached the bottom of my being, under a sea of fallacies, far below the level of consciousness, I gave a sharp kick of the heel, projecting myself upward.

Onward I stumbled, once again almost losing my balance. I had passed the second veil. I had to keep on walking. It proved effortless for a little while, as I was feeling so light, strangely empty: my life unfolded had been folded back and handed back to me, to protect and hide in the inner shadows of the self.

From the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of the lady demon. She had passed the first veil, she was still treading, not a spark teasing her heels. Around me, blue-white stars were flying so thick, I could no longer

see my feet. I could only manage to make out the trail several steps ahead of me, and hope that this and the Blood would be enough to guide my slogging along the next curve of waving light.

The next curve was by far the longest and, I had been warned, the most demanding. Soon, I felt as if I were no longer walking so much as digging my way through sparkling snow. My whole body was shivering in a fit of gooseflesh; I kept my teeth clenched.

What visions assailed me then, I could not make sense of. My whole being was lost in the act of slowly thrusting one foot in front of the other. I was not flesh anymore, I was only motion, without a beginning and without an end. I was the step, the path, the Pattern.

I stopped, suddenly. Nearly stopped, against the third veil. Mindlessly, I pushed. I threw my body, mind, and soul against the shimmering wall of light, which was now sparkling well above my head. This one wall could not be shattered. It did not care for my past, my future, my self. Only pure, unquestioning will could bend it, blend in, and win. As a sheer effort of will had created the Pattern, only the same could make it mine.

And thus was I created anew... in a silent explosion of blinding light... by my own will reborn, full of tremendous strength and staggering like a colt on legs which had never learnt to walk. I was quivering, intensely proud, I nearly forgot but did not: three more steps, after the third veil; they offered no resistance, yet were infinitely difficult to take, in my present state of utmost weariness.

A weird tearing sound, a last flare of sparks; I stood at the center of the Pattern. I looked up and smiled. Close to the faraway door, I saw Brand, smiling too, a crossbow in his hand. Before I could will myself away, he had fired.

I had no time to hope that the Pattern would stop it somehow: the bolt flew right above it, straight to me. Another tearing sound, I felt the tip of steel piercing. Only, without pain.

I did not get it. I had felt it, I was sure of that, yet it was suspended in the air, two steps from me. Without thinking, I extended my arm, seized the projectile, pulled. With it came what had stopped it, which I cannot describe but as a thin sheet of shadow.

My own. Even today, I would not be able to explain, but when I

crossed the last veil, naked, it seems that my shadow got stuck, so when I finally pulled through, it was ripped away from me. In Tir-na Nog'th, from that night on, no light ever drew my silhouette again.

Everywhere else, I am just as normal as the next Amberite. Which, considering the one facing me then, is not overly heartening a statement. Obviously utterly unpleased, Brand was striving to come closer, with little success. He could no longer near the Pattern; it was as if an invisible wall were ostracizing him from the scene. His glare carried undiluted hatred; his still smile seemed to exude smoke as had Werewindle. Once more, he vanished. Then it was my turn.

My father was no longer there. I stood alone on the highest crest of Kolvir, the stately mount still shrouded in a mantle of night. If I had to believe the moon, not much time had passed since I had entered the city in the sky. I paused to consider its ghostly walls, shimmering silver against the dark; finally, with a shrug, I turned away and left—for the true Amber.

Weary as I was, I was not so tired as I had expected. I broke into a sweeping jog, to drive away the chill of the night. Still naked, I carried nothing but my own shadow. By that I mean, not just the one then embossed by the moon on the rocky soil; somehow, I had also managed to hold on to the one which had torn away from me, up there in Tir-na Nog'th.

I draped it over my shoulders, as one would a cape or a mantle. If not protection, maybe it would lend me some semblance of decency when I would enter the palace now held by my father. Of course, would it have been a silk shirt, a velvet doublet, a pair of pants and also of sturdy boots—for the rocky soil was no pleasure to run upon—, it would have been more to my liking, but then...

That's just what it was. I stopped dead in my tracks, skidding on pebbles and missing falling flat. Luckily, the boots I now wore held on pretty well to the ground. I considered myself under the silvery light. Had what I thought had happened actually had? Could I wish those black pants to become pink? I could. It was... uh... *ugh*. I switched them back to black.

Could I ask for a weapon? No need. The weapon was there, a

rapier at my side. When I unsheathed it, though, it turned to shadow and vanished. I wished it back in its scabbard; there it was. I pondered. Picturing gauntlets, I felt a velvet pair form on my hands. I seized the handle of the rapier.

I unsheathed it, held it high to the light of the stars. It was silvery and straight and slender. Like a frozen moonbeam, strikingly beautiful. I dropped it and it faded away. Whatever this was I wore, my own shadow apparently, or that of my fantasies, it could not exist but as a whole: so the rapier could be brandished only as long as it touched one of the gauntlets, which covered the wrists of the silk shirt, which flowed under the doublet and the pants, and through the pants was linked to the sturdy boots. Everything was one. And Pierce was dumbfounded.

I had no time to linger on the subject, though. I had to warn my father. Even if... It was a most peaceful night. Never had Amber looked so secure, snugly sheltered under the clear starry sky, between Kolvir, Arden and the endless sea.

That's when I started to regret my not waiting for the lady demon to meet me at the center of the Pattern. Was she in any way responsible for Brand's sudden inability to draw nearer? Surely, a bad omen could have waited. I had proven too hasty, panicking like Shadow stuff. But a lord I was! Maybe a prince one day. On this night which had seen my initiation as one of the Blood, I felt like a king.

I fairly looked the part, too, in this new attire. Adding a smile to the picture, again I was on my way to the city, though at a more moderate pace. I was enjoying the glorious sight and the cool wind, slightly tinged with sea salt; daydreaming under the moon, I was savoring beforehand the pride of announcing my success to my father, rehearsing the scene in my mind.

It had to be a surprise. No official escort for me tonight. Eluding the guards dozing off in the shadow of the main arch, I entered the city. Amber! Ever so resplendent, you my sleeping beauty. In your stillness, still unequaled; in your silence...

"Fucking bastard!"

Beg your pardon? What was *that* for? Not for me, I realized. The hearty scream had fused from inside a nearby alehouse. Having stopped dead in my tracks, an open door made me the witness of an appalling free

show. There was... a creature, there, something like a man but behaving like a rabid monkey. Dancing on a table, sword in hand, he had begun redecorating the place. In red.

There was no denying his skill. His style, on the other hand... I walked in. Needless to say, the dancing monkey did not even notice, until I had come to stand just in front of the table he thought was a stage. To his credit, I must say he restrained his sword in my presence. Still, having to consider what was obviously a distant kin of mine making a fool of himself...

... in Amber itself...

... in a bloody bar brawl...

"Get down here."

I had formulated my request with suffering civility. I was not ready to accept anything akin to a refusal, yet it seemed that it was what this clown intended to feed me with, in the form of a rhetorical question: "And if I declined?"

"You don't." So stating, I had given a sharp kick to the table he was standing—no, no longer standing on. He was presently on the floor, though still on his feet. His look was that of a wronged man, properly furious, and nearly made me laugh. Only, my own irritation was still burning too hot, and guards had begun pouring in. I was not going to provide the city with more of a ground to revile or mock the Blood.

"Come."

Much to my surprise, he complied. I sat him at the bar—on which he laid his dripping weapon—and ordered drinks for two. I was accepting the mug proffered by a trembling barman, when I heard myself being ordered to put it down, stand up, hand over my rapier, and walk out. Without turning to face the daring sergeant, I gave him notice of the risk he was taking.

He proved willing to insist, weapon in hand. I pivoted, parrying his blade with mine still half-sheathed, jolting the hilt onto his wrist. There was a yap, the clink of steel meeting the floor, but my drink was still warm and soon back to my lips.

When the sergeant insisted on insisting, I had to scratch his thumb. It proved enough of a distraction for my drinking companion to succeed in kicking up even more of a rumpus, as he had somehow and for whatever reason put the already sparse hair of the barman on fire. Emptying my mug

upon the blaze did not stop the fuss. Grabbing his sword from the bar, on which it was still dripping red next to a dead lizard, I dragged my troublesome kin out of the alehouse.

I thrust him in front of me. "So who are you?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Each one his part: I ask the questions, you answer."

"And why that?"

"I have your weapon."

"You would kill an unarmed man?"

I smiled.

He straightened up: "You should know then, that Diamens is my name." It was his turn to smile, a smile which revived much too recent memories. "And Bleys is my father's."

"Eric is mine's."

"I'm sorry to hear tha—"

The words had not finished soiling the air before my blade was on his throat. The hell with it. I was going to kill this clown and settle the matter with my father later.

"Diamens!" A booming voice, a human gong. Everyone's hero rushing to the rescue: Gérard had entered the scene, motioning the guards to keep at bay. "Diamens, what have you done *again*?"

My blade on his throat, the redhead kept silent. From the corner of my eye, I saw the sergeant I had scolded gesturing to attract my uncle's attention. Finally, he did. After a brief talk, Gérard turned back to us.

"Why, Diamens?"

"Why what? Oh, you mean, the lizard?"

"Not just a reptile…"

"Oh, there were a few mammals also. Does that count?"

The big man was fuming. "You… do not deserve to be called an Amberite. And you…" His stare fell on me. "What do you think you're d… Pierce?! You… You're back?"

"So it seems."

"Uh?" jerked the redhead. "What? He's really family, this one?"

"More so than some!" I had thrown his sword at his feet, positioning myself. My intentions were clear, though not to his liking. The weapon still

lay on the muddy stone. "And, if I refuse?"

"Feel free to lie down."

"Where I belong, in the castle?"

"Indeed, its graveyard!"

"Pierce! Enough. We must talk."

"Sure, uncle. This won't take long."

"Pierce, your father..."

I twitched. "Yes?"

"Five years after you left. He died."

I did not move. I think it took me five full seconds before I could swallow. Gérard was not a liar... and he was not done with me: "Random is king, now."

That was the funniest joke. I let my rapier find its way back to its scabbard. Without a glance behind me, I was walking away.

"Pierce! Where are you going?"

How should I know?... There was no going anywhere, I was just walking. Away. Away. Away. My father, dead. Random... king. So funny. Surely, that explained why Amberites could be found bar-brawling in the one true city.

Wasn't it Arden gathering around me? The tall trees stood as a funeral guard of honor, their shivering foliage shielding eyes now dry from the light of the stars. Pray my steps would stop at a clear stream... where I may cleanse myself from this very long night! When would a dawn come? I heard wild barking in the distance.

Closer, now. Hounds of Julian's, of course, who scoured Arden as if he owned it. The Hunter was after me, I had little doubt about that. Honored as I should have felt, I had half a mind to run away, so little did I want to face another failed vassal of my father's. Would this shadow of mine I had brought back from the sky city cover me entirely, down to my scent?

Could a son of Eric's consent to run away? More to the point: could I deny myself, worn out as I was, the pleasure of a dramatic scene? That insane uncle of mine had been right on the mark, there: even more

than my father, I was a sucker for a big show. Carefully selecting the best spot, I finally got into position upon a jagged tooth of a rock, in the center of an uneven clearing.

To my tense satisfaction, I was not made to wait. Soon, the feral growl had grown into a low rolling rumble, shattered only by the thunder of hundreds of hammering hooves. Suddenly, a locomotive burst into the clearing, heading straight to my pedestal. It came to an abrupt halt, rearing; erect on Morgenstern, Julian was facing me.

I was sitting high on a stony fang, yet barely at eye level with my knightly uncle. We were alone, apart from the snarling hounds. There was no horse around other than the giant Morgenstern, upon which Julian was enthroned in his curiously enameled armor. Under the silvery light, he was glowing a ghostly white, his hard face colder than the rock under my ass.

"Greetings, uncle."

"Pierce. What a surprise." He would not, so I smiled. A Gérard-generated surprise, assuredly. And those two had been the closest to my father. In that instant, I could not help finding this trust somewhat misplaced. Ah, well... Welcome back to Amber.

"It will be a pleasure for me to escort you to the castle."

"I would not dare to distract you from whatever required your riding in the wee hours of night. Worry not, my uncle: my absence may have been a long one in your loving eye, but for me, it was but a fleeting moment. Indeed. I shall find my way back."

"I insist."

Pierce, prisoner in Amber. Call it a busy night... "I am weary, the castle far away..."

"My camp is closer, should you favor the alternative."

"So I do." Too late for me to Trump out. "Let's sally forth." I had leaped to the ground. At six feet two, I stood no higher than the bulging chest of Morgenstern. Julian had silenced his hounds; we were proceeding in acceptable peace.

What would the meaning of my going for his camp be—for Julian, and for me? Maybe I was not so eager to find out. More politics. "Where was my father buried?"

"Not far from here. Where Arden meets Kolvir."

"Show me."

He would not. Echoing his silence, I had come to a halt. He did not have to like it, I could find the place by myself, I could manage, and so could he: he could get back to his camp on his own. Finally, with a sharp nod, he altered the direction of his riding. With a soundless sigh, I resumed my striding.

The sky had paled perceptibly when we reached the emplacement chosen for my father's abode of last. A massive monument of black marble, it stood half buried in the rocky side of Kolvir, facing the city of Amber.

"From here, I proceed alone."

"I'll be waiting."

You bet. Without a word added, I left Julian amongst his dogs, to tramp on toward the tomb. I *was* growing tired. Upon reaching the monument, I let my hand rest on the cold marble stone, which from so close, in the pale light before dawn, I could see was strewn with red. The door was made of steel; I did not have the key. Maybe I could shape my shadow so as to mimic one; once inside, shielded from my uncle's eyes, I would be free to Trump away.

Then, the day arose. Suddenly, dawn's fingers were stroking the nape of my neck, while also pointing at letters in the metal engraved: "For Amber He Died." I had uttered each word in a murmur, savoring their irony. This inscription, the same, was adorning the tombs of both Osric and Finndo—a double sacrifice to their father.

Then the ray widened into a pool of light, and other words emerged above the bitter ones, erasing them in their radiance:

And that was it. Glowing like embers, the words that said it all, that set my blood on fire. I was indeed a prince. In a delicate position. Father...

No wonder His majesty Random would be so eager to meet with your heir. And I had kept him waiting. What a shame should I be the one to shrug off family duty!

I felt like a living flame, as if this last night had not been the longest of my life. Briskly, I met back with Julian, who somehow had found me a horse. I leaped onto the saddle. There would be no Trumping out. I was smiling, a hard smile, that made nervous even that monstrous steed of his. "To the camp?" he asked. I shook my head. With a sudden pressure of the knees, I had led my mount to take the only path worth taking: "Amber!"

Pierre-Alexandre Sicart:

I don't remember the campaign ever having a name. It was more than ten years ago, and nobody but the GM had even read the novels. I think Cédric, Joris and Ludo were just as puzzled as I was by Stéphane's introductory speech about Pattern and Logrus, Substance and Shadow. But the rulebook had real neat illustrations and, a bid war later, we all were hooked!

The name Pierce was a gift from the GM. The first scene I played was that with Diamens, Joris's character and actually Brand's son; from my diary of the time, whose first chapters have survived on my successive computers, I carry it rather faithfully into "Fors l'Honneur." I take more liberties relating the encounter with Julian. As for what happens in Tir-na Nog'th, call it a recent truth: a better, shorter way to introduce Pierce (costume included) than what I had come up with originally.

The words *fors l'honneur* stem from a longer sentence (attributed to Francis I) which can be rendered as "Everything is lost, *honor excepted*." But for that reference, I hope that the story doesn't betray my being French by birth, if currently an NYU student. It is my first fiction published in English, after a few in my native tongue; I can only wish it will have found some favor in your eyes. — Pierre-Alexandre / pierce@sicart.info

TIR-NA NOG'TH

by Genevieve Cogman

I climb the silver steps, to stand on high
Above the shifting sea and moonlit land:
The clouds are far away: I take my stand
And walk the silver city in the sky.
Around me dreams take shape: there a desire
So long repressed, a future I'd refuse,
The paths I didn't take and wouldn't choose,
All crowd around me as I climb yet higher.
But worst of all the things that I have seen
Are visions of the futures I have lost,
Marred by my choice, caught by an early frost,
Which never now shall be but might have been:
Until I almost wish the clouds would rise,
And let me fall to earth, and close my eyes.

Genevieve Cogman:

Genevieve Cogman in an English clinical coder and data analyst. She is also a freelance RPG writer in her spare time, having produced material for White Wolf (mainly Exalted and Orpheus), Steve Jackson Games (In Nomine and GURPS), and Guardians of Order. Life is too short. Start writing now.

[Note: Ms. Cogman's play *The Tragical History of Eric, King of Amber* is one of the very best pieces of Amber fiction not written by Zelazny himself. If you haven't read it, Google it and enjoy!]

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BLUE HORSE, DANCING MOUNTAINS

By Roger Zelazny
Illustrated by Michael Kucharski

I took a right at the Burning Wells and fled smoke-ghosts across the Uplands of Artine. I slew the leader of the Kerts of Shern as her flock harried me from high-towered perches among the canyons of that place. The others abandoned the sport, and we were through, beneath a green rain out of a slate-colored sky. Onward and down then, to where the plains swirled dust-devils that sang of sand eternities in rock that once they were.

At last the winds fell off and Shask, my deadly mount, blue stallion out of Chaos, slowed to a stop before vermillion sands.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"We must cross this neck of the desert to reach the Dancing Mountains," Shask replied.

"And how long a journey might that be?"

"Most of the rest of the day," he said. "It is narrowest here. We have paid in part for this indulgence already. The rest will come in the mountains themselves, for now we must cross where they are very active."

I raised my canteen and shook it.

"Worth it," I said, "so long as they don't really dance in Richter terms."

"No, but at the Great Divide between the shadows of Amber and the shadows of Chaos there is some natural shifting activity in play where they meet."

"I'm no stranger to shadow-storms, which is what that sounds like — a permanent shadow-storm front. But I wish we could just push on through rather than camp there."

"I told you when you chose me, Lord Corwin, that I could bear

you farther than any other mount by day. But by night I become an unmoving serpent, hardening to stone and cold as a demon's heart, thawing come dawn."

"Yes, I recall," I said, "and you have served me well, as Merlin said you might. Perhaps we should overnight this side of the mountains and cross tomorrow."

"The front, as I said, shifts. Likely, at some point, it would join you in the foothills or before. Once you reach the region, it matters not where we spend the night. The shadows will dance over us or near us. Dismount now, please, unsaddle, and remove your gear, that I may shift."

"To what?" I asked as I swung to the ground.

"I've a lizard form would face this desert heat."

"By all means, Shask, be comfortable, be efficient. Be a lizard."

I set about unburdening him. It was good to be free again.

Shask as blue lizard was enormously fast and virtually tireless. He got us across the sands with daylight to spare, and as I stood beside him contemplating the trail that led upward through the foothills, he spoke in a sibilant tone; "As I said, the shadows can catch us anywhere around here, and I still have strength to take us up for an hour or so before we camp, rest, and feed. What is your choice?"

"Go," I told him.

Trees changed their foliage even as I watched. The trail was maddeningly irregular, shifting its course, changing its character beneath us. Seasons came and went — a flurrying of snow followed by a blast of hot air, then springtime and blooming flowers. There were glimpses of towers and metal people, highways, bridges, tunnels — gone in moments. Then the entire dance would shift away and we would simply be mounting a trail again.

At last, we made camp in a sheltered area near to a summit. Clouds collected as we ate, and a few rumbles of thunder rolled in the distance. I made myself a low lean-to. Shask transformed himself into a great dragon-headed, winged, feathered serpent, and coiled nearby.

"A good night to you, Shask," I called out, as the first drops fell.

"And — to — you — Corwin," he said softly.

I lay back, closed my eyes, and was asleep almost immediately.

How long I slept, I do not know. I was jarred out of it, however, by a terrific clap of thunder which seemed to occur directly overhead.

I found myself sitting up, having reached out to and half-drawn Grayswandir, before the echoes died. I shook my head and sat listening. Something seemed to be missing and I could not determine what.

There came a brilliant flash of light and another thunderclap. I flinched at them and sat waiting for more, but only silence followed.

Silence...

I stuck my hand outside the lean-to, then my head. It had stopped raining. That was the missing item — the splatter of droplets.

My gaze was attracted by a glow from beyond the nearby summit. I pulled on my boots and departed the shelter. Outside, I buckled on my swordbelt and fastened my cloak at the neck. I had to investigate. In a place like this, any activity might represent a threat.

I touched Shask — who indeed felt stony — as I passed, and made my way to where the trail had been. It was still there, though diminished in width, and I set foot upon it and climbed upward. The light source for which I was headed seemed to be moving slightly. Now, faintly, in the distance, I seemed to head the sound of rainfall. Perhaps it was coming down on the other side of the peak.

As I advanced, I became convinced that it was storming not too far away. I could now hear the moaning of the wind within the splashing.

I was suddenly dazzled by a flash from beyond the crest. A sharp report of thunder kept it company. I halted for only a moment. During that time, amid the ringing in my ears, I thought that I heard the sound of a cackling laugh.

Trudging ahead, I came at last to the summit. Immediately, the wind assailed me, bearing a full load of moisture. I drew my cloak closed and fastened it down the front as I made my way forward.

Several paces then, and I beheld a hollow, below and to my left. It was eerily illuminated by dancing orbs of ball lightning. There were two figures within it — one seated on the ground, the other, cross-legged, hanging upside-down in the air with no apparent means of support, across from him. I chose the most concealed route I could and headed toward them.

They were lost to my sight much of the way, as the course I had

taken bore me through areas of fairly dense foliage. Abruptly, however, I knew that I was near when the rain ceased to fall upon me and I no longer felt the pressures of the wind. It was as if I had entered the still eye of a hurricane.

Cautiously, I continued my advance, winding up on my belly, peering amid branches at the two old men. Both regarded the invisible cubes of a 3-dimensional game, pieces hung above a board on the ground between them, squares of their aerial positions limned faintly in fire. The man seated upon the ground was a hunchback, and he was smiling, and I knew him. It was Dworkin Barimen, my legendary ancestor, filled with ages and wisdom and godlike powers, creator of Amber, the Pattern, the Trumps, and maybe reality itself as I understood it. Unfortunately, through much of my dealing with him in recent times, he'd also been more than a little bit nuts. Merlin had assured me that he was recovered now, but I wondered. Godlike beings are often noted for some measure of nontraditional rationality. It just seems to go with the territory. I wouldn't put it past the old bugger to be using sanity as a pose while in the pursuit of some paradoxical end.

The other man, whose back was to me, reached forward and moved a piece that seemed to correspond to a pawn. It was a representation of the Chaos beast known as a fire angel. When the move was completed the lightning flashed again and the thunder cracked and my body tingled. Then Dworkin reached out and moved one of his pieces, a Wyvern. Again, the thunder and lightning, the tingling. I saw that a rearing Unicorn occupied the place of the King among Dworkin's pieces, a representation of the palace at Amber on the square beside it. His opponent's King was an erect Serpent, the Thelbane — the great needle-like palace of the King of Chaos — beside it.

Dworkin's opponent advanced a piece, laughing as he did so. "Mandor," he announced. "He thinks himself puppet-master and king-maker."

After the crash and dazzle, Dworkin moved a piece. "Corwin," he said. "He is free again."

"Yes. But he does not know he is in a race with destiny. I doubt he will make it back to Amber in time to encounter the hall of mirrors. Without their clues, how effective will he be?"

Dworkin smiled and raised his eyes. For a moment, he seemed to be looking right at me. "I think his timing is perfect, Suhuy," he said then, "and I have several pieces of his memory I found years ago drifting above the Pattern in Rebma. I wish I had a golden piss-pot for each time he's been underestimated."

"What would that give you?" asked the other.

"Expansive helmets for his enemies."

Both men laughed, and Suhuy rotated 90 degrees counterclockwise. Dworkin rose into the air and tilted forward until he was parallel to the ground, looking down at the board. Suhuy extended a hand toward a female figure on one of the higher levels, then drew it back, Abruptly, he moved the Fire Angle again. Even as the air was burned and beaten Dworkin made a move, so that the thunder continued into a roll and the brightness hung there. Dworkin said something I could not hear over the din. Suhuy's response to the probably naming was, "But she's a Chaos figure!"

"So? We set no rule against it. Your move."

"I want to study this," Suhuy said. "More than a little."

"Take it with you," Dworkin responded. "Bring it back tomorrow night?"

"I'll be occupied. The night after?"

"I will be occupied. Three nights hence?"

"Yes. Until then—"

"—good night."

The blast and the crash that followed blinded me and deafened me for several moments. Suddenly, I felt the rain and the wind. When my vision cleared, I saw that the hollow was empty. Retreating, I made my way back over the crest and down to my camp, which the rain had found again, also. The trail was wider now.

I rose at down and red myself while I waited for Shask to stir. The night's doings did not seem like a dream.

"Shask," I said later, "do you know what a hellride is?"

"I've heard of it," he replied, "as an arcane means of traveling great distances in a short time, employed by the House of Amber. Said to be hazardous to the mental health of the noble steed."

"You strike me as being eminently stable, emotionally and

intellectually."

"Why, thank you — I guess. Why the sudden rush?"

"You slept through a great show," I said, "and now I've a date with a gang of reflections if I can catch them before they fade."

"If it must be done..."

'We race for the golden piss-pot, my friend. Rise up and be a horse."

ROGER & ROLEPLAYING

A Memoir by Walter Jon Williams

The last time I saw Roger Zelazny, he was playing in a role-playing game that I was running. The game was set in contemporary New York, and the characters were all homicide cops trying to solve a mystery.

There had been a slaying in a Mafia family, and it became clear that the only person who was ever likely to talk was going to be the mistress of one of the mafiosi. Some of the other characters were less than delighted with the thought of cuddling up to someone who a prominent gangster might consider his property, but Roger's character waded right in. He called her up and said:

"I hear you like flowers and maybe a drink, so I thought I'd pick you up after work and buy you a drink with a flower in it; and maybe we can go to Tavern on the Green, because it's got nice views of the Park and the Park has flowers in it; and so we can have drinks with flowers in them while we're looking at the flowers in the Park, and maybe I'll find you a flower for your hair . . . "

I can't remember the whole speech, but he went on in this manner for some time--- I should point out that Roger frequently spoke like that, in long, spontaneous, unrehearsed, grammatically correct complex sentences--- and I spent the whole time staring at Roger with my mouth hanging open, thinking to myself, What a smoothie!

So of course the Mafia maid succumbed, because, after all, who wouldn't?

Though I'd been an acquaintance and colleague for twenty years, I can claim to have known Roger well only in the last year of his life. During that time Roger tried a number of new things: role-playing games was one of them, and living with Jane Lindskold another, and Jackie Chan movies a third. (Not all the items of this list have quite the same degree of gravity; but

that was Roger for you, equally at home with adventure, romance, exotic worlds, and pratfalls.)

I'd first encountered Roger through his work, which at the time (the late 1960s) displayed a completely original blend of mind-staggering concepts, deep and wide-ranging knowledge, and a singular grace of expression. It is hard to overstate how important a figure Roger Zelazny was in the science fiction field at that time. No one who encountered *Lord of Light* or *The Dream Master* during that time will ever forget the experience. Roger was, literally, a revolutionary: he entered the field, remolded it, and left it in his image. If Roger's later works did not achieve the impact of his earlier work, possibly it was because the center of the field had shifted in Roger's direction: his work stood out less because everyone else's work had become more like Roger's.

I had the pleasure of meeting Roger some years after that, in the mid-Seventies. A few years later I became a colleague and semi-collaborator: we cheerfully plotted the evil that befell one another's characters in the Wild Cards series, and when the editor of the Tor doubles series had the brainstorm of asking me to write a sequel to one of Roger's stories, Roger graciously allowed me to follow his own *The Graveyard Heart* with my *Elegy for Angels and Dogs*.

But I didn't see Roger much during this period. I would run into him at science fiction conventions, usually in another state, and spend pleasant hours chatting with him, but outside of these professional engagements we rarely saw each other, even though we lived only 65 miles apart. He was at heart a very shy man, and did not seek out company.

But when Jane Lindskold moved in with Roger in 1994, the two of them began making the social rounds as a couple, and I began to see them on a regular basis. Besides Jane and myself, many of Roger's other friends, like George R.R. Martin and Melinda Snodgrass, were both science fiction writers and gamers. Roger's initial bouts with illness left him a bit frail, and gaming offered a chance for a brand of social amusement that wasn't physically taxing.

Roger and Jane were joining a boisterous gaming group that had been meeting regularly, with more or less the same personnel, for twelve years or so. Since so many in the group were imaginative writers (and quite

a few have also worked as actors), our games tend to be strong on inventiveness, roleplaying, and plot. As I've already remarked, Roger was a shy man, and during games was at times eclipsed by the more aggressive, confident members of the group. At times, when I was running a game, I had to tell the others to shut up and stop shouting advice so that Roger could get on with playing his character. And once he was given the floor, Roger always did well.

Whether through observation, Jane's coaching, or his own repressed talents as an actor, Roger tended to shine in his roles. Initially he chose minor characters, a bit removed from the main thrust of the action, but nevertheless complete characters who had their own part to play. In a game set in feudal Japan, Roger turned up as the Chinese poet Li Po, a character who specialized in carousing and extemporaneous verse. The poetry that Roger recited on these occasions had the genuine flavor of Li Po, too.

In a starship adventure game, Roger appeared as a preacher named Schuyler. Chaplain Sky was a navy "xenochaplain," supposed to be able to minister to the spiritual needs of any conceivable denomination of human, alien, or the odd sentient rock. (He didn't do very well with the rock, actually.) The professional requirement to believe in everything led to Chaplain Sky's not believing in anything very much, and led to some of Gaming's Most Funny Spiritual Moments, as when Sky blessed some space marines about to hit the beach on an enemy-held planet. Sky's address went more or less as follows:

"Insofar as I may be heard by anything which may or not care what I say, I ask, if it matters, that these soldiers be granted luck and favor, regardless of anything they have done or failed to do which requires forgiveness. Conversely, if not forgiveness, but something else may be required to ensure any possible benefit for which they may be eligible, I ask that this, whatever it may be, be granted or withheld, as the case may be, in such a manner as to ensure them receiving said benefit. I ask this in my capacity as their elected intermediary between themselves and that which may not be themselves, but which may have an interest in the matter of their receiving as much as is possible for them to receive of this blessing, and which may in some way be influenced by this ceremony. Amen."

I'm not sure if this stirring address boosted the morale of the troops,

but Roger's fellow players were in stitches. (And Zelazny fans will recognize that Roger paraphrased another prayer, given by another chaplain, in his own *Creatures of Light and Darkness*.)

I wanted very much to get Roger into my Amber campaign, not simply because he was Amber's creator but because I thought he could add so much insight and interest into the proceedings. But my Amber campaign was run with a different group of people who met at my house, which would have added about another 50 miles to Roger's trip, and he turned me down.

I was quite disappointed. Jane Lindskold told me afterwards that he wanted to play, but that he was afraid he wasn't strong enough to stand the extra 50 miles. If I'd only known the reason, I would have happily moved the game closer to him. Alas, I was not to know the reason until after Roger's death.

Roger's last character was that of the tough, crazed New York detective in my NYPD game, a far darker character than he had played up to that point, a paranoid Vietnam vet who slept with a gun under his pillow and who wouldn't hesitate to kill a bad guy he couldn't get at legally.

While playing the mystery game, Roger built solid cases against a couple of felons and romanced a Mafia don's mistress, all while pursuing a serial killer who was also, in (as it were) his day job, a syndicate soldier.

It was getting late, and I was preparing to start the showdown of the Mafia story by having the serial killer burst into Roger's room while he was in bed with the don's mistress. I looked up from my table to talk to Roger, and to my surprise he responded to me incoherently. I asked a question, and the answer didn't make sense. He had been growing visibly weaker over the previous months, and I concluded he was overtired and brought the game to an end. I'll play the showdown out first thing next week, I thought.

Two days later, George R.R. Martin called me to tell me that Roger was dying in the hospital, and less than twenty-four hours later he was dead. Roger had kept the precise nature of his illness a secret from all but a half-dozen people, and though I knew he was sick--- "a kidney infection" I'd been told--- I didn't know that the kidney problem had been the result of a course of chemotherapy for cancer.

After the shock, the grief, the memorial services, and the passage of a few months, I ran the police game one more time.

As the other detectives pieced the violent action together afterwards, the serial killer had broken into Roger's apartment and opened fire on Roger's character from the bedroom door. Though Roger's character was wounded, he nevertheless managed to hurl a throwing knife into the bad guy's throat, killing him, before passing out from his wounds. The Mafia don's mistress applied first aid, saved his life, called the ambulance, and rode with him to the hospital.

If I couldn't give Roger a happy ending, I decided, I could at least give one to his character. And so, in our imagination at least, the tormented New York cop will live happily ever after with the Mafia don's mistress, sharing their usual table at Tavern on the Green, and having drinks with flowers in them while breathing the scent and looking at the flowers on the table and she wears flowers in her hair . . .

Walter Jon Williams:

Walter Jon Williams hit the science fiction best-seller lists in 1986 with "Hardwired," and has since produced masterpieces like "Metropolitan" and "City on Fire." He is currently writing the "Dread Empire" series.

Catch up with his latest at: http://www.thuntek.net/~walter/

Another Somewhere

By Chris Kindred and Bridgette Ruggles
Illustrated by Lizete De Assis

Oliver looked south over a long expanse of valley that would eventually lead down to the coast he had just left. The western edge of the valley was broken by a long chasm, the right side running up into large rocky hills. For those who didn't wish to travel miles out of their way, or climb the heights as he had, there was a tired wood and stone bridge just big enough for two carts to pass side by side. To the east the valley eased into gentle foothills with forests rich in game and profitable timber.

It was from somewhere in those woods that he'd heard a sound that had intruded into his thoughts.

He watched as a rider broke free of the woods on a pale, dapple-gray horse, making a beeline across the valley for the steep narrow path that would bring the rider up to the hill where he was.

There were cries and baying from a lone hound. Several more riders burst out of the woods.

The rider threw back the hood of her cloak, copper hair streaming free like a banner, and leveled a wooden staff in the direction of the bridge. A ball of fire leaped from the staff, like a comet hurtling out of the sky, and the bridge exploded, aflame fragments of tinder spiraling down into the gorge. Oliver nodded. A weapon like that would explain why the riders in pursuit were so widely spread.

Nearer the gap now, the witch leveled the staff again, this time at the air itself. There was no visible effect until she charged her horse out into open space. The horse flew across the chasm without pause and began the daunting climb up the other side.

Oliver smiled, appreciating the recklessness and daring of the rider's tactics.

Not to be so easily lost, the second group gathered closely around a small man in a pale gray cloak. Like the witch, he too carried a wooden staff, and his spell conjured a translucent band of color stretching out to the other side, but the riders were less confident and forced the wizard to cross first. Within minutes they were following the witch's trail again.

It took only a second for Oliver to decide to interfere. He looked in a direction other than that which the witch had ridden and whispered, "She's over there." In that place several rocks fell and cracked, producing a sound much like that of someone moving.

The disturbance caught the attention of two of the men, who reigned up, scanning the slopes for some sign of the witch, but the man in the lead yelled for them, following the hound.

Just a little ways from where he watched, the ridge crested over the spur of land still dividing them and Oliver could see the witch climbing the other side. The pale horse was nimble and sure-footed and moved strongly despite the hard run and its slender build. As they turned to twist through the maze, Oliver caught the mare's profile: the high arched neck and tail and a delicate face. Oliver stiffened in his saddle as he recognized the Deigan breeding. This, combined with the witch's blazing hair, gave him pause. "Old ghosts," he whispered.

Still intent on intervening, Oliver raced after the witch. As he rode, he concentrated on the feel of the Shadow about him. He was certain several of the rocks he passed were unstable. The probability of a rockslide was great. It seemed certain to him that the slabs would give way at any minute, blocking the trail behind him and likely crushing the pursuers. There was a shout from the riders and nervous whinnies from the horses and Oliver could hear rocks sliding and crashing, but the route was too short for the full effect he envisioned. The men stopped when they saw him, swords drawn.

Then a woman's voice called down from the heights. She was hidden from Oliver's view by the ledge, but the voice was familiar: impudent, daring and not befitting a lady.

"Lord Harric!" She shouted, a smile evident in her tone. "I thank thee for a lovely run this day! For that, I think it only fair to remind thee that, mean as they may be, thou art on Lord Rrarid's land. Pray thee make haste, or before the sun sets you and he will surely run afoul of each

other."

The men ground their teeth and looked about unhappily. Their eyes frequently returned to Oliver, not certain what to make of him.

"Fool witch, think you safe?" The man Oliver presumed was Lord Harric snarled back. "Tis still a far run to shelter and one man is not enough to buy your passage."

"One man?!" The witch scoffed. "I need no man to buy my passage."

Oliver chuckled as Lord Harric looked back and forth, trying to decide where Oliver fit into the scheme of things.

"My lord," Oliver said, "your hunt is ended for this day. Be a reasonable man and go home. If you do, your men's wives and children will thank you. If you do not, their widows and orphans will curse your memory." With lightning speed, he drew his silvery saber from its scabbard and held it ready. "The choice is yours." His voice was cultured and cold.

Before Lord Harric could answer, there was a bark and snarl from above and an answering whinny of warning from the witch's mare. A shower of small rocks and dust drifted down as the mare dodged the hound, which had finally found who he'd been sent after, and without being able to see them, Oliver could tell how very close they were to the edge.

The men had gleeful, vicious expressions that matched the snapping and barking of the hound, but something changed up above and their expressions turned to horror. The hound let out a cry of pain and all that could be heard was the hound and the scrapping of claws across rock.

The mystery was resolved for Oliver when the hound tumbled over the edge with its opponent, careening off rocks as they fell. Unlike the hound that howled its fear and pain, the sleek pale panther was absolutely silent. The unnatural creature sprang free midair and landed gently on its feet as the men made signs to ward off evil. It was about the size of a bobcat or lynx, but with eyes the same ashen color as its body.

It regarded the men with a lofty, fearless gaze and then sprang into the air, resuming its original staff shape before it passed back out of Oliver's sight.

"You'll pay for this witch..." Lord Harric didn't raise his voice, but it was full of hatred. He turned to look at Oliver. "And you should

think harder before you take allies, for yours today is ill chosen."

"You should perhaps consider whom you make enemies of, my lord," Oliver replied. "You never know who they might be."

The man sneered and yanked his horse around, driving it down the slope.

"More the fool you," Oliver thought, watching him. As the men gathered up the badly wounded hound and followed their lord, he heard the witch riding off.

Oliver sighed. "There's never a bloody airship when you need one," he said to himself as spurred his horse around to pursue the witch.

He was about to clear the last passage in the rocks, one of those places perfect for an ambush, when a sleek form darted towards his horse's legs. The blur of movement caused the horse to rear in alarm. Well aware of the threat, Oliver kept track of the cat's movements as he calmed the horse and came to a stop. The panther paced back to the center of the trail and crouched.

"Who is it now who stalks Rrarid's Witch?" The voice was from just up ahead, but whether to the left or right was unclear.

Oliver smiled, "Oliver of Amber."

"Ollie?" Tabitha's voice was now plainly recognizable as the mare jumped onto the path, spurred on by her rider's surprise. She rode straight to him, so close their knees touched, and then leaned over to throw her arms around him for a hug that threatened to pull them from their saddles.

"Tabitha!" Oliver's carefully controlled mask slipped. "I'm so happy to see you! Of all the sorts of people I thought might be lurking back here, you weren't on the list." Tabitha lifted her head and gave him a friendly, enthusiastic kiss square on the lips.

The kiss was a greater shock than the hug.

Tabitha shifted herself fully back into her saddle again, smiling broadly as he regained his composure.

"I had no idea that you were here. But perhaps I should have," he said as he contemplated the events that led him there. He slowly reached over to lower her hood. "It has been too damn long since I saw you last."

Tabitha tilted her head, letting him remove her cloak hood, but there was a warning gleam in her eye.

"That last isn't my fault." She plainly considered it to be his. "But come, I've a place to be and impatient people waiting!" She wheeled her mare in the narrow space and trotted away. Her hand lifted as she passed the panther and the creature flew into her hand as an ash staff. "Do you have business, or can you ride with me a bit?"

"Nothing in all the worlds is pressing enough to cause me to leave your side," Oliver said.

"Then you get to see the disreputable cutthroats and miscreants I've gotten myself mixed in with. If Uncle Random really wishes to consider this place for a Circle treaty, he has to do something about it. It's a backstabbing, mean little mess that's getting truly ugly." She set the mare to an easy cantor and Oliver followed, wondering what, or who, she'd gotten involved with.

She didn't seem concerned, just stating the facts. Of course, Oliver reasoned, when everyone is afraid of your mother, what do you have to afraid of?

A minute later he added, "I am sorry I haven't seen you in such a long time. I remembered your birthday party, but after that I lost touch. I would have called but your mother is a smart lady and keeps your Trump to herself. I should have given you a copy of mine, despite my being ordered not to do so. I am sorry. I have missed your laugh and your smile, Tabitha."

Tabitha reined her mare in a bit, drifting to the side so there was room beside her, his apology accepted.

"I've missed you too. But it gives us more to talk about now, does it not?" She grinned cheerfully, gave his arm a light squeeze and removed her hand.

"Volstag, Adela, and myself were ordered to not give any of you our Trumps nor were we allowed Trumps of any of you. Your respective parents feared we would take you adventuring." He smiled, "They were probably right."

"That tactic might have worked with Rhiannon, or even Herne, but they failed to stop me." She looked very proud of that fact.

Oliver considered this. "I assume you've walked?"

"Not yet." Tabitha made a face. "Mother says I have to wait at least until I'm twenty. I've tried to reason with her that if I could go to Tir

and battle my way through prophesy at nine, at nineteen they should let me walk the Pattern, but then she points out that I'm not that yet either and won't hear another word. I think that's why she's let me gad about here. If I were in Amber all the time I'd be intolerable." It was a rather honest assessment of her situation and she didn't seem the least bit ashamed by her behavior.

Oliver chuckled. "The more things change..."

"So, what are you doing here?"

"Intelligence gathering," Oliver replied. "And yourself?"

"Shopping." Tabitha replied.

"Shopping? Were the annoying lord and his men rival buyers?"

"You could say that." She grinned, knowing full well that she'd left him with more questions than she'd answered.

"Harric's a lackey for one. His Lord has something that should have been mine, except that it was stolen, and then his boys strong-armed it out of the thief's hands. I've managed to keep track of it, and now it's a matter of getting it back. So I signed a contract with one of the Barren Lords and eventually it's going to fall into my hands and I'll get it as it was taken." She explained it as if it were all very simple.

Oliver laughed. "That does explain one question. The term 'Rrand's Witch' bothered me once I knew she was you. I have great difficulty imagining anyone referring to you with a possessive."

"Oh... none of them knows my name, most don't even know what I'm called here. As superstitious as they are, they don't want to." She changed her tone and did a fair imitation of some old, backwater farmer offering a sage warning to some young fool. "Sayin' the name of one of the Mage-born is ill luck I tell you, ill luck!"

Oliver chuckled remembering the warding signs he had seen the men use.

"It's a mean place, and with corruption the way it is, the only way I'm getting what's mine is by banditry, unless I pull family ties and I'd rather not. This is so much more interesting! As for the rest, until the contract's up or he breaks it, I'm his. But he's almost broken it a number of times, so I'm none too concerned."

Oliver frowned, not liking the implication, and for the moment, the

terms of the contract were of greater concern to him than what had been stolen.

"Do you mind my continued company for a while longer?"

"Not at all." She gave him a winsome smile. "I haven't just gotten you back to send you away already. Besides, you haven't told me the rest of what you've been up to!"

Oliver returned the smile. It seemed they were to employ similar tactic: keep the other around and eventually the answers would be revealed. It wasn't the inherent lack of trust frequently propagated by their family, but it was a step in the endless game they all seemed to play. Once he'd been determined that they would be different from their elders, but it seemed they could never completely escape it.

"What would you like to know?" Oliver asked. "You always had a gift for asking interesting, to say nothing of impudent and inappropriate, questions."

"I've a reputation to live up to? The stress!" Tabitha feigned a faint, causing the mare to sway.

"As though you ever had trouble living up to expectations," Oliver said quietly.

Tabitha laughed, in high spirits, and let a minute tick by while she gathered her thoughts.

"So are you gathering information for your own interests, or have you been set to the trail?" She gazed at him. "If you have questions about the local riffraff I can help, but I'm afraid I haven't been down to the ports or the city."

Oliver considered. "And you were worried about your reputation. To answer, I am indeed gathering some information for our King and my time was largely spent in the ports. I am also pursuing interests of my own."

"Really?" She peered sideways at him. "And what might those be?"

"You may remember that I love mysteries and riddles and puzzles," Oliver said as he watched her ride, her hair and the green of her cloak at odds with the dusty tan landscape. "I am here contemplating the most intriguing mystery I have ever encountered. As a child, I was absolutely fascinated because every time I thought I understood the mystery, I would

discover new clues and new interpretations I had not seen before. It was marvelous and frustrating and annoying all at once," Oliver smiled. "In this place, I have only quite recently discovered new clues. They give me much to think about."

"Really?" Her tone was thoughtful and she regarded him intently before turning away again to watch where she was going. "I might be able to help with that too."

"You always do," Oliver whispered.

The mare tossed her head and pranced for several paces, picking up cues from her rider.

Most of what they rode through now was ravine-riddled grassland with isolated stands of trees, but the open areas were beginning to shrink as the trees spread. It was drier here, with none of the mist that shrouded the valley. It was, as she'd said, a meaner, poorer land.

They rode in silence now, Tabitha occasionally stealing glances at him, a little smile on her face as she led down through another ravine into a heavily wooded valley.

As confident as he was in Tabitha's abilities, Oliver watched for ambushes or sentries and he wasn't surprised when they were brought up short by a voice calling from a sheltered point about even with where they sat on their horses.

"'Oo goes there!" The voice was rough, male, and not well educated.

"Ged, if you can't spot me at a hundred paces, you shouldn't be on guard duty." Tabitha replied dryly as a roughly dressed man with beady eyes climbed down to block the trail, glaring at Oliver after letting his eyes slide along Tabitha.

"Aye, but whatta 'bout 'im? 'Oo's he, then?" There was a bitter note of challenge in the man's voice.

"My lover. Now get out of the way before I ride you down."

Only years of practice allowed Oliver's face to remain expressionless.

"'e is not!" The man protested, belligerent and definitely jealous.

"Have you been sniffing around my bower again?" Tabitha challenged, urging her horse forward a few steps and leaning down to look

him square in the eye.

"No, I 'aven't!" The man took a hasty step back.

"Then you know nothing except that you aren't!" Tabitha thumped him in the chest with her staff and the man leaped away as if he'd been stung.

Knowing she had him, Tabitha urged her horse forward and forced him from the path.

Tabitha was humming and Oliver favored her with an appreciative smile. In a family that loved its intrigue and melodrama, questions were gauche; so he waited, knowing more pieces of the life she'd chosen would be revealed and it would all make sense eventually.

"Rrarid is going to turn absolutely purple!" When she felt they were out of earshot Tabitha laughed, glancing back the way they'd come. "Ah... he's wasted no time—see, just above the tree line, there's a watch point."

She stopped her horse, turning and pointing up above the tips of the trees. There was a moment's delay and then a series of flashes, a pause, and another set. The former feudal lords of Llyerdell had hung on to what little was left of their domain: sheer determination, ruthless cunning, and as Tabitha pointed out, near instant communication.

"Camp knows I'm on my way and not alone. It should be quite a homecoming."

"It has already been a hell of a reunion." Then, turning professional, he added, "This is your place. If you want my aid, it is yours. If you do not, I will not be offended. I will follow your lead."

"We'll be okay." Tabitha assured him. "They're coarse, and they'll bully you if they think they can, but Rrarid's not a bad sort really and I'm pretty sure he suspects that I'm here on my own agenda. He certainly knows I don't need him. The flip side of that is that I've made the past several months of his life remarkably easier and having a witch with real Talent has done wonders for his status."

Oliver nodded. Power always had value, and the more a man could command, the better.

Tabitha bounced along, until she finally turned back to Oliver to share.

"It's just that I haven't done exactly as he thought I would. I've done everything to the letter!"

"Shadow is full of people who do not grasp with whom they have done a deal. I suspect our family is responsible for many of the legends of dealings with devils," Oliver smiled.

"Most probably." Tabitha agreed.

The valley was more of a nook in the hills, with huge trees that shielded the campsite from view until the trail opened into a wide clearing with several campsites and a lone permanent building. As predicted, there were a number of people waiting for Tabitha, all of them armed men. While Oliver took note of the men, their weapons and positions, Tabitha ignored them.

There were women near the house and the large tents that were their homes, and while they watched the commotion with interest, none approached.

"Lord Rrarid!" Tabitha crowed and pulled a leather sack from her cloak, holding it over her head like a trophy. The gesture grabbed everyone's attention and no one protested when she forced the line back by nearly riding people down.

The man she called turned out to be an older fellow, going thick in the middle and gray on top. He looked tired and worn, but still sharp as he moved to intercept Tabitha as she rode towards the middle of camp. Tabitha kept riding, parting the crowd who were busy trying to watch the sack and size up Oliver.

Tabitha tossed the sack down to the Lord, and then continued riding right on past him. Oliver instantly picked out which tent was hers. It was as large as the family tents, but trimmed with dark forest green around the entrance flap and made of fine canvas that draped and appeared casually elegant even with its hem in the dirt.

There was a strangled roar behind them.

"What is this!" Lord Rrarid was indeed purple with rage. There were veins popping out of his face and his eyes were about to leap from his head. A few people were on the ground, having had the misfortune of being between Tabitha and the irate Lord. "What is this?!" Gold coins tumbled as he shook the bag in frustration.

"It's the reward for returning the idol," she replied innocently. "It was agreed that we would return the idol to his Lordship, Sir Averley, and collect the reward, and you did charge me with doing so."

"You were supposed to bring it here! Bring it back and then we'd take it back!"

"Lord Rrarid, you really must be more clear. I took it back. Just as I'd been told. There is the reward, minus my share of course, and with the grateful blessings of his Lordship." Oliver saw the light go on when the error dawned on the man. He looked ready to explode but Tabitha kept talking as if nothing were wrong.

"I think I even raised you a few notches with Sir Averley, seems he has a White Roc Mage in his Court. A man with true Talent and we had quite a talk after I'd let him know in no uncertain terms that I'd tolerate none of his magics while I was present. Rather surprised the old goat, but once I had his respect we got along nicely. Sir Averley was under the misconception that the Barren Lords were bereft of the old knowledge, so I corrected him for you, and made certain that he knew that if he wished to treat with the Llyerdell lords then you were just the man to contact. Else I'd not be in your employ, of course."

The man struggled to breathe, unable to complain when he'd just been dealt a coup. Tabitha calmly stripped down her horse. When she was finished, she smiled sweetly, made sure Oliver had his horse tended to, and took Oliver's arm, heading into her tent.

"He's not going in there!" Lord Rrarid recovered his voice and roared, the challenge prompting several men to put their hands to their swords in case someone disagreed. "Your contract says...."

"My contract," Tabitha snapped, "states that neither you, nor any of your men may touch me for any reason. It says I owe you three years of service provided you do not break any of the terms. It says nothing whatsoever about who's servicing me." She lifted her head in a lofty fashion as jaws dropped, a few of the younger faces went red and an older woman at the back burst out laughing.

Mentally geared for battle, Oliver had been maintaining a calm and confident expression since they approached the camp. Yet now he had to rely on years of experience and carefully honed instincts to ensure he showed

nothing more telling than a slight, but appropriate, smile.

There were no further protests as Tabitha led Oliver into her tent. Once she'd closed the tent flap, she let go of Oliver's arm and kicked off her boots.

"Well..." Scandalized by her own behavior, she was bright red as she stepped into the main part of the tent. She hung her cloak on a hook and fanned herself with a hand, trying not to laugh. "I don't believe I just said that! Did you see the look on his face?"

"Lord Rrarid's or mine? I think you almost killed me. I would have been the first prince of Amber to die of a heart attack."

"It was his face I meant, of course, if I'd dared to look at you I'd have laughed or gone scarlet on the spot, and that would have ruined the scene."

Oliver removed his boots and cloak, placing them with hers before following her.

"If you want, I'll promise I'll try not to do anything else scandalous while you're here." Her words would have had more weight if it hadn't been for the mischievous grin on her face.

"I would never ask you to change your nature," he teased.

Her tent was surprisingly lavish. A thick, tan rug covered the entire floor, with smaller more colorful rugs separating out individual spaces. Her bed sat in an island of blue ringed around with white fringe that looked like waves lapping at a shore. The bed itself was a four-poster affair shrouded in sheer blue fabric. She had a heavier drape bundled up to one of the roof poles to block the sun. A dressing area was sectioned off with another blue rug and a folding wooden screen curved into a horseshoe shape. There was a stand with a water basin, and several trunks scattered along the walls; the one by the bed did double duty as a nightstand. A low round wood table surrounded by pillows sat on a red rug with cream-colored fringe.

Oliver studied the tent. "I do not believe I ever was in your rooms in Amber," Oliver said. "You have excellent taste."

"Thank you." Tabitha smiled shyly at the compliment and flopped down on the pillows near the table.

"When we were children, we were too busy with our own lives, I think. You were always having adventures and I was always practicing or

studying. When I became an adult, it would have been inappropriate for me to visit your room."

"Hmm... quite probably..." Her tone did not sound convinced of that. She fed fuel into a little coal-like burner and then began rummaging through the trunk next to her.

Oliver removed his sword and scabbard, setting them on the ground next to him as he sat down.

"I'm going to make myself tea, but if you want, I have other things as well." She pulled out several liquor bottles, most of them local.

Oliver looked at the bottles. "Nice selection, but tea would be excellent, thank you."

In addition to the liquor she had cookies, crackers, dried fruit, and nuts that she set out on the table in no particular order. "Help yourself," Tabitha offered.

Many of the items were distinctly out of place, clearly being from somewhere with better technology and consumers that like things easy. He doubted that Tabitha had gone out of her way to get them, which left him to wonder if her mother had supplied them.

Instead of eating, he took a deep breath and let it out. There was a meditative quality to his breathing and posture as he let the tension and stress flow away. This accomplished, he looked up and watched Tabitha prepare the tea.

Tabitha didn't meditate, she fussed. Mint and other earthy, spicy smells seeped into the air, and by the time she was done picking through tins of herbs and crumbling her selections into the strainer, she was calm again.

"I brought this all in by teleport," she said, talking now that she was done. "I picked my space and then, poof, instant home. There was almost a panic!"

Oliver laughed, imagining the scene as the tent appeared out of thin air.

She turned around to sit properly, setting on the table small round bowls which were apparently tea cups, and then the teapot in the middle while it brewed.

"It got a little chilly this winter, but this is better than what most of

'em have, so I don't complain. Almost bailed when it got real bad... but figured that with my luck, Rrarid would come looking for me and there'd be all sorts of explaining. That, and I think I'd have felt wimpy if I didn't stick it out."

"I find it difficult to imagine anything being able to force you to abandon a project once you have set your mind on it," Oliver said.

"You could imagine it if you'd seen this place during the Wolf Moon when I felt like my eyeballs were going to freeze right in my head."

"Some of the children got real sick, and some of 'em died... The first had been sick a while, I guess, and the witch woman they'd had forever couldn't heal her and wouldn't let them bring her to me." Tabitha's bright mood fell, remembering. "Some of the others started coming down with the same thing and the witch woman couldn't heal them either. A second one died and one of the mothers decided she didn't care what the bone woman said. She trudged through the snow and stood yelling at my tent flap until I woke up. I took her in and she went back for her other child as well. The older girl wasn't so bad off... but they'd waited too long for the little boy, and I couldn't save him. Another little boy died as well, but by then most of the children were here with me. Each of them had a parent who was willing to trust me to try and save their kid and they fought their way to my tent one by one."

She poured each of them a cup of tea. "I set up a ward to keep it warmer in here than it would have been, and even though they were miserably sick, they were pretty good for me. Of course, with all the coughing and crying I don't think I got any sleep that couple of weeks."

Oliver listened to her tale and considered it in silence. "I was right," he said at last. "You still choose to do what is right over what is easy."

She dipped her head bashfully. "Just doing what needed done."

"So what have you been up to, wandering around out in the worlds?" Her tone indicated she wanted a change of topic.

Oliver contemplated his answer. After a time, he said, "I do a lot of traveling. I think I've been in every palace and every back alley and every seedy bar in the Golden Circle, and in many farther beyond. I have seen beautiful things. Fabulous works of art and amazing buildings. I've read wonderful works of literature and heard music that still haunts me. I've seen

beautiful and terrible Shadows of stars and flame and sea. I've been past the places where Shadows turn mad and walked in the Black Zone and through the shifting Ways of the Courts of Chaos." He paused. "You once asked me what I would do when I was grown. I have done the things I told you I would do. I continue my father's work. I defend the family and the realm and I solve problems for the Crown. I walk in the dark places."

"Hmm..." Tabitha listened thoughtfully. "You have chosen a lonely way to do it."

"I do not know when I last had a conversation with anyone whose opinion truly mattered. Nor do I know when last I sat with someone who was truly interesting," Oliver agreed.

She glanced up at him with a quick smile that faded sadly. "I can't remember the last time I had a conversation with someone who wasn't afraid of me, except that White Roc mage this morning, and he despised me. And mother wonders why I Trump her so often." She shook her head and poured another cup of tea for each of them. "It gets very tedious always having to worry that some ignorant coward is going to try and slip a knife between my ribs." She sounded annoyed instead of afraid, irritated in much the same way she would if someone were always late.

Oliver frowned and sadly nodded his head. "I understand."

He picked up his tea, paused, and then he smiled at her. "I was right about you all those years ago."

She glanced up, quizzically. "How do you mean?"

"The ghost Queen Tabitha," Oliver replied. "You didn't grow up to be her."

"Ah.... No." Tabitha laughed softly, remembering the Tir visions they had confronted as children. "But there might still be time for that."

"Sometimes I'm still not certain Rhiannon ever recovered from that. Such strange events to have been through, and I still get tense going to Rebma. I watched him die but I keep expecting to turn a corner and find the Coral Duke standing there. And I still have dreams of it too, now and again. Strange, confused things where people are switched around and say what someone else has said. Sometimes I'm in the Pattern Room and I've just watched Adela finish her Walk and teleport, and all the room begins to dissolve. Except this time I don't have Mother's Trump and I turn and I

find that I'm all alone and I spend the rest of the dream running, trying to get back to the stairs. I always wake up falling...." Her voice trailed off.

"I have certain issues in the Pattern Room myself." Oliver looked at his right hand, flexed his fingers, and then looked away. "I cannot see the Pattern without remembering the moonrider's screams," he said quietly. "And sometimes, late at night, I find myself drawn to the stairs. I hear myself warning us not to go to the Pattern and saying that everything would still turn out well in the end." Then, he smiled and said, "Actually, though, when I said you didn't grow up to be her, I meant that you are prettier than she was."

Tabitha laughed, surprised, one hand fluttering up to her face.

"Well, maybe not being evil will do that for a girl." She rolled her eyes. "But thank you."

"My pleasure," Oliver replied.

Oliver sat regarding her. "You know, you drove me mad when I was young. I always excelled at anticipating people. I knew how most people would react in any given situation. Herne, Rhiannon and Adela were easy. Verance and Volstag were each predictable in their own way. I even knew how to anticipate Jake. I just assumed she would do something frivolous and petulant and amusing and contradictory," he smiled. "But you, you gave me fits. Every time I thought I knew what you were going to do, you did something different. It was terribly frustrating...."

"I never realized I was such a conundrum. The trick," she said, leaning forward and dropping her voice, "might have been not to try to anticipate me at all."

The sound of riders approaching had turned into a commotion, and now there was someone shouting. The cry repeated again and Tabitha looked up.

"Ivy!" The man's voice became intelligible, drawing closer. "Ivy!"

"Oh... what does he want?" Tabitha frowned, getting up.

"Ivy!" He was just a few feet away now, but bellowing as if she might not hear him through the canvas walls.

"Quit your caterwauling, I'm not deaf." Tabitha snapped from her doorway, refusing to step out in bare feet.

"The Lord summons you," the man commanded.

Oliver shook his head in amusement.

"Then the Lord can come calling himself. I'm not a hound to be whistled out of the woods." She closed the flap and walked back inside, pausing to pick up her boots. "This is likely to be interesting and will require either an argument, or negotiation."

Oliver nodded. "You of course have my services, should you wish them, Ivy."

"You are too generous, kind sir."

Still grinning, Oliver pulled on his boots, fastened his sword belt and secured his cloak about him.

Lord Rrarid was outside her tent hollering in record time and Tabitha strolled out in a leisurely fashion to meet him. Oliver followed and stopped about a yard behind. Close enough to act if necessary, but far enough to give her room.

"Damn you, woman, we've got Lord Downe's carriage within reach and not time for your foolery! Git on yer horse!" Rrarid was once again red in the face, several shades darker than Tabitha's hair.

"While your men might have spent the night wenching and drinking and the morning recovering, I have already worked this day. One ride a day, Lord Rrarid, one ride a day." She turned away.

"Don't you turn away from me, girl!" And he reached forward to catch her arm.

Oliver's right hand went to his sword with no one seeing it. His left hand held a throwing dagger hidden by the length of his arm. With the merest movement, he could bury it in Rrarid's throat and be at Tabitha's side with his sword drawn.

There was a hiss and the ash staff that had been resting peacefully near the tent flap leaped into her hand of its own accord. Tabitha snapped around, fully prepared to whack the man in the face with the staff, but he'd already leaped away.

"Don't. You. Ever." Tabitha advanced on him, her head and voice low.

Lord Rrarid retreated with his hands up, his men falling away even quicker. "You'll 'ave tomorrow off... you see... we'll make it up to you... even keep the boys quiet." The men were nodding vigorously as Rrarid

tried to make amends. Tabitha sniffed in disdain.

"First pick of the catch—without the jackals rushing me—and tomorrow off." She replied, her chin lifted as her gaze swept across the assembled and dared them to reject her offer.

"You'll be the ruin of me, woman." Rrarid ground his teeth and nodded. "Done."

Tabitha regally inclined her head and went to saddle her horse with Oliver right behind her.

"I think things are going to get more interesting yet." Her grin was back, gleeful and impish and ready to ride into whatever lay ahead.

Catching her look, Oliver's voice sounded much more like the adventurous Oliver of earlier, "Would you care for some company?"

"I insist." Tabitha teased, "This lot of women are worse than their men! Leave a tasty morsel like you behind and there's not likely to be much left when I get back. Oh... and watch your back..." Tabitha added. "They've been known to vent jealousies under the cover of battle."

"I'll endeavor not to kill Lord Rrarid," Oliver whispered.

"You? Jealous of Lord Rrarid? Why ever for?" She could play dense with ease, but this time she seemed genuinely confused.

"He dared to touch you," Oliver said. "I thought the contract forbade that."

"It does." She winked. It was very convenient how things worked out sometimes.

Rrarid and his men were waiting, their horses stamping impatiently. As Oliver and Tabitha trotted up, the whole group wheeled and galloped out, gaining speed quickly.

Recklessness seemed a way of the land, while stealth apparently had little value as they pushed-through dense woods at breakneck speeds on thin trails that seemed to come and go.

Tabitha rode with her hood thrown back, crouched low over her mare's neck, the staff held at an angle across her body. She raced along near the front, just off to the side where she wouldn't get boxed in by the others, easily the most visible and blithely unconcerned by the fact.

Oliver stayed close to Tabitha, watching for threats from within the group and without.

The mad rush slowed, a few men riding forward to check the trail while the rest followed at a slower pace that allowed the horses to catch their breath. Along a flat stretch of ground used as a road, Oliver could pick out wheel tracks and marks from the passage of several horses. Tabitha stopped, looking down at the same bit of ground.

"It is entirely too quiet." She murmured, glancing at him. "I do believe we have a problem."

"A trap," Oliver nodded.

"Could be, rabbit..." She drolled, looking around.

The rest of the group seemed to disagree and after a moment they began moving forward in earnest; bits of rag tied around bridles and tack kept noise to a minimum now and the group spread out wide. Some kept to the road, such as it was, while the rest scattered out to either side. Tabitha picked the taller of the two hills the road cut between, lagging behind the leaders. Her gaze was sharp and fully aware.

Around one more bend, the quarry came into view. A fat, well appointed carriage escorted by several guards. Oliver recognized the livery of the guards. It belonged to one of the wealthy Houses with ties to the Emperor and at odds with the old Lords like Rrarid for having taken their land.

Tabitha dropped back, her attention on the carriage as the guards wheeled about and Lord Rrarid's men charged forward. There was a man with a crossbow up top the carriage, taking shots at riders; luckily, the bouncing caused most of his shots to go wild. But the carriage couldn't outrace the horsemen and when it pulled up, the battle began in earnest.

Oliver drew his saber and a throwing dagger and remained at Tabitha's side.

Ignoring the battle boiling in front of her, Tabitha continued to watch the carriage. Waiting. Then the door swung open and a weathered, pinched-face old man stepped out, looking straight at Tabitha. Long gray hair flowed down his back and he carried a dark staff of old oak, which he raised to the heavens, crying aloud.

Rrarid's men fell back at the sight of the mage, even as Tabitha laid her heels to her mare and abruptly charged forward. Oliver raced alongside her, forcing riders aside.

Two of the guards rushed forward to confront them, and Tabitha let Oliver cross her path to deal with them while she continued on, never taking her attention off the mage. The first man was easy enough to dispatch with the dagger, the second guard was surprisingly good, but Oliver had been on too many cavalry charges with Volstag to be deterred by one man, especially while intent on shielding Tabitha. He struck hard and fast, relying on superior strength and speed to dispatch his opponent. Formed in Tir-na-Nog'th of moonlight and silver from the fragments of Jake's blade, his saber cut deeply and Oliver rode on.

There was a crackle like lightning and the smell of ozone and white fire danced along the edge of Tabitha and her horse. The mare screamed in pain and Tabitha swung down to confront the mage on her own feet. She was close, and as she lunged forward the mage met her halfway. There was a flash of blue as the staves met.

Bright and loud, the mage fight distracted the others, combatants falling apart from each other to gawk. A sphere around the two of them wavered in and out of sight like a mirage, while between them visions seethed, things briefly and barely seen like shooting stars, but dark and vicious as the battle went from physical to ethereal.

The two of them remained perfectly still now, only a foot from each other. Their staves planted firmly in the ground with both hands upon them. A wind unfelt elsewhere tossed their hair, Tabitha's like a bonfire to the elder mage's draft of ice.

More riders came over the hill, among them Oliver recognized Lord Harric and his men from earlier.

Oliver smiled, recognizing the annoying lord. "I warned you about making enemies," Oliver whispered. "You should have listened."

To their credit, Lord Rrarid's fought well, falling back together and holding their own against what were now superior numbers.

With reinforcements, several of the guards broke off and worked their way toward the mage duel. Some of Rrarid's men had a similar thought and the battle became an intricate dance as each group tried to reach the other's mage like a bloodthirsty game of capture the flag. It was enough to keep Oliver busy and he whirled about, putting himself in the path of anyone approaching Tabitha.

Tabitha's mare squealed and there was a grunt as someone got knocked over. For a moment there wasn't anyone there. Then an overdressed woman with an ornate hairdo and makeup appeared as she struggled to her feet and backed away from the irate mare. The woman had a dagger, but she seemed unskilled and made little shooing motions to keep the animal away from her.

The men were too busy with each other to spare the strange scene more than a glance; Oliver noted the woman's sudden appearance and the dagger in her hand, but Tabitha's mare didn't want the woman any closer than Oliver did and when she decided the woman wasn't moving fast enough, the mare lunged, her ears pinned back and her teeth bared. The woman shrieked and fled back to the carriage, leaving a large chunk of her skirt dangling from the mare's teeth.

Between Tabitha and the wizard things were reaching a colorful crescendo, the mental combat briefly visible as the shield imploded. There was a pop and whuff of air and the mage cried out, one hand going to his face. He flailed with the staff as he went down and Tabitha's staff jumped to intercept it, but Tabitha was leaning too heavily on it and the blow caught her across the side of the head.

Oliver inwardly winced as Tabitha staggered back, but she managed to stay on her feet, clutching at her horse when the mare slipped in under her outstretched hand.

The loss of the mage spurred on both sides. Rrarid's men stood their ground with their backs to Tabitha as the guards desperately pressed the attack. Tabitha recovered enough to keep out of the way, even as Lord Harric began working his way around after her.

Oliver moved to intercept Lord Harric. He locked eyes with the lord. "Once before I warned you. Now I do so again. There shall not be a third meeting. You will not pass." Oliver's voice was a chill whisper and the devil himself danced in his eyes.

Harric met Oliver's gaze, sneering at the challenge.

"You are just one man among rabble. You should have stood aside from the start." He goaded his horse forward, a different beast than he'd ridden earlier, and tested Oliver's defense. The blow was solid and well executed and the horse feinted with him, obviously trained to this purpose.

Oliver smiled getting the measure of his opponent and his steed. "You are mistaken, little lord. I am not just one man; I am a Lord of Shadow. You will not pass."

Lord Harric caught a glimmer of whom, what, he was up against, but he gritted his teeth and held his ground. Stupid as it was, Oliver admired the man's bravery and continued to smile.

Other riders joined Harric, and Oliver found himself flanked by Lord Rrarid and another of his men.

Oliver buried his dagger in the throat of the first of Harric's riders who came within range and already had another in hand. Unfazed by the numbers and determined that no one would approach Tabitha, Oliver continued: "You will not pass."

With the other riders' arrival, even with the immediate loss of one, Harric charged. Rrarid stayed on Oliver's left, but the other man was pushed back. Harric sought to draw Oliver forward, giving ground and fighting defensively to try and give one of the other men a shot at him.

Oliver smiled and shook his head at Harric. "You will not pass."

Rrarid finished off his man and bullied his way forward, gaining as much ground as the other man had lost so that the entire group slowly turned as if in a dance. The turn brought Tabitha into Oliver's sight and he caught glimpses between his part of the battle.

She had drawn further from the fighting, getting edged toward the carriage as the fight carried men back and forth. Two men approached on foot from the carriage side, one making a grab for the mare's reins while the other made for her.

In freeze frame images snatched between one swing and the next, Oliver saw a blow send Tabitha over backwards. The staff flew from her hand and somewhere between leaving her hand and reaching the ground it shifted, the leopard form leaping for the man's throat the moment its feet touched the earth.

Seeing Tabitha fall, Oliver decided that the time had come to end his dance with Harric, but Harric saw her too and in a desperate gamble lunged after Tabitha.

Taking advantage of Harric's distraction, in an efficient manner that would have made Corwin proud, Oliver thrust his saber deep into Harric's

back. Ducking a swing from another man, Oliver ripped his saber free and wheeled around intent on reaching Tabitha's side.

Harric went down slowly, as if surprised by what had just happened, or maybe just by the speed with which it had happened.

As Oliver broke free of the group, a staff poked out from behind a tree and tripped a young man still trying to gain control of Tabitha's horse. The man went over backwards and the mare leaped forward, biting the offending hand and trampling the man who owned it.

The young man in the gray cloak then did his best to tiptoe away from the scene. Oliver noted his movements, but the mage had helped instead of threatened and he let him go for the moment.

The staff cat crouched by Tabitha, its tail swishing back and forth calmly. It turned to regard Oliver as he rode up, and then glanced at the mare when she returned, its ears flicking as it looked around to see if there were anyone else.

Oliver remained on his horse, looking down at Tabitha. "Do you want gray cloak dead or alive?"

Tabitha braced one arm on the ground to hold herself up and squinted in the direction Oliver pointed. "Let him go. He's got no wish to be here."

Oliver looked about the battlefield once more. Satisfied, he swung himself off his horse.

Tabitha lifted her hand to the cat's head and stood, leaning heavily on the staff again. She winced as she straightened her knee. She was dirty, rumpled and pale, and there were leaves in her hair, but her only injuries seemed to be an ugly bruise on her right cheek and temple and a bruised cut above her left eye.

Tabitha sighed and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she glanced once at the dead mage and turned to regard the carriage. "What I think's in there better be in there."

She started toward the carriage as Rrarid's men were mopping up the last bits of resistance.

"Nice work with the mage," Oliver said. "Your mother would be proud."

"Eh..." She shrugged, not looking back and not wanting to talk about it.

Something moved in the carriage as they approached.

"Hello Elspeth." Tabitha spoke in a conversational tone, as if there weren't a door firmly closed between them. "I will give you two options. Choice number one is that you open the door and give me my necklace. Choice number two is we rip the carriage in half and take it from you by force. At which point you no longer have a place to hide... unless you'd like to take your chances as Lord Rrarid's mistress."

"It's mine!" The woman inside shrieked in a sharp, spiteful tone.

Tabitha and Oliver sighed in unison.

"Elspeth, we've already gone over that and I'm feeling too cranky to repeat myself. You have til three."

"When Lord Downe's men get here, you'll pay for this. Master Saric will see to it!"

"One. Master Saric is dead."

Silence followed Tabitha's pronouncement.

"Two."

Oliver moved to rip the door off the coach, merely waiting for Tabitha to give him the word.

"Three." Tabitha was turning to Oliver when the door sprang open and the girl poked her head out. Hatred made the girl's face look like a mask.

"Like it will do you any good!" She spit out the words as she threw something into the dirt at Tabitha's feet. "Everyone knows no man would love a filthy slut like you!"

Oliver arched an eyebrow as the door slammed shut again.

"What a lovely girl," Oliver said in a voice dripping with sarcasm.

Tabitha blinked, and then slowly knelt to retrieve the necklace. She stood carefully, her feet braced and the staff held tightly. In her hands was an ornate necklace made with a dozen glittering pieces of opal on delicate platinum chains. The strands were tangled and small diamonds sparkled from between the larger stones as Tabitha gently brushed the dirt off of it and slipped it into her pocket.

"Well, missy, who'da thought you had it in you?" Lord Rrarid was standing over the dead mage, smiling happily despite the bloody cuts on his arm and leg.

"I did," Oliver said more to himself than to anyone else.

"Oh? Well, maybe ya did. But then, I doubt you knew this old blackard the way we did." Rrarid replies with a wry smile, gesturing to the carriage. "So what've we got?"

"Lord Downe's mistress, likely on her way to the summer manor now that Lady Downe is safely in the city. I would imagine the jewelry in the trunks are worth her weight in gold." Tabitha replied as she mounted her horse. Her face was calm and quiet, but the expression was frozen in place and the light had gone out of her eyes.

Oliver silently noted Tabitha's expression as he mounted his own horse.

"I'd return her unharmed, but he will likely be willing to pay for the men and horses you lost here today to get her back."

"Aye... he might..." Rrarid was giving the carriage a thoughtful look, scratching at the stubble on his chin.

"I wouldn't get greedy, Lord Rrarid, you can ill afford an all-out war with Lord Downe."

"Well, now that I got you... and 'e knows what you can do, I don't have much to worry about at all, now do I?"

Tabitha said nothing. They didn't seem to miss her reply as they went about cleaning up, some of them tending to the injured or dispatching those that couldn't be saved while two men accompanied Lord Rrarid to the carriage.

Oliver watched the exchange in silence. He brought his horse close to Tabitha's mare. In a gentle whisper none save Tabitha could hear, he said, "When we get out of sight of the men, let me know if you are well enough to ride. I can lead her back while you rest."

Tabitha's head dipped, as if to nod or maybe just to acknowledge that she'd heard him.

"Lord Rrarid," Tabitha addressed him, not caring if any of them actually stopped to listen. "I would like to thank you for your hospitality. All in all, you have presented yourself as a respectable individual. Perhaps we will meet again."

Rrarid and the others looked duly confused, but then the light dawned on Rrarid and he had that look that said he wanted to scream

again.

Oliver smiled to himself.

Tabitha murmured something and Oliver felt the ground vanish from beneath his horse for an instant. In the blink of an eye they were in a meadow near a large stream. The sun was slightly higher in the sky, but the woods nearby looked the same.

The canvas tent with the forest green trim sat in front of them and Tabitha let her mare walk toward it. She sat slumped in the saddle, her last spell having taken what strength she had left.

Oliver looked about and followed. When they neared the tent, Oliver dismounted and cautiously approached the mare.

"Tabitha? I am going to help you down now," he said in a soothing voice, as much for the mare's sake as hers.

Tabitha nodded, letting go of the saddle horn and staff to reach for his shoulder as he lowered her into his arms. Oliver carefully carried her into the tent, stopping only to remove her cloak and boots, leaving them at the entrance.

The panther followed, stopping when Oliver did and watching him with unblinking eyes.

Oliver sat her down at the table and covered her with his cloak.

"Tabby," he said, "I will be right back. Don't you fall asleep on me. If I find you sleeping when I come back, I will sing to you. You have been warned," he teased, and left the tent again. He quickly stripped the tack from both horses and then gathered supplies from his saddlebags. Finding what he wanted, he examined the stream and when he was convinced it was clean, he filled a flask with water.

Dark circles under her eyes made her look even paler than she was, and she hadn't moved from where Oliver sat her down. The cat was lying on her bed, its pale driftwood color standing out strongly against the blue bedspread. It was openly staring at him, its tail slowly curling and uncurling.

"She's going to be okay," Oliver told it. "Trust me."

It lifted its chin, meeting his eyes, the ears flicking back and forth at his voice. Then it relaxed again, ignoring him.

Happy to be ignored, he hummed as he gently washed Tabitha's face, taking particular care with the cut above her left eye, then took her

hand in his and softly squeezed it.

"Talk to me, Imp," he said firmly. "Do not make me sing."

She shook her head, unable to look up at him. "I am simply too tired. I'm... She...." Disgusted with herself, she pressed her hand to her head again. "I cannot even order my thoughts..."

Sitting in front of her, Oliver reached out to her and placed his hands softly on her shoulders. "If there is anything I can do to help," he said, "I will do it. When you want to talk, I will be here for you. If you need to be alone, I will give you space. And," he said, forcing a smile "I will even shut up now."

"I'm okay..." She sighed and lifted her hand to rest it on his before it took flight to flutter with her thoughts. "It's just... I mean... There's..." She sighed. "Do you remember those hard little bouncy balls Uncle Bleys brought us? They were blue or green or had swirls and we'd throw them as hard as we could in the hall and they'd bounce like mad off the walls, and then we'd throw them at the floor as hard as we could and try to make them bounce off the ceiling and they'd go all over the place and we couldn't catch them and we'd get yelled at? My head feels like that... my thoughts all over banging around and none of them good... and I'm confused and tired and...."

She spoke quickly, racing against the silence and then her hand returned to rest against his. "I don't need space. I don't need you to shut up, you could even sing if you want.... I don't know what I need."

"You need a backrub," Oliver said as though it were the most certain thing in the world. "May I?"

When she lifted her head again, she had more color in her face and looked calmer, almost peaceful and definitely sleepy. "That was nice." She said in barely a whisper. "Thank you."

"My pleasure, M'Lady," Oliver answered. "I think it's probably safe for you to sleep now."

"Oh...?" Looking around as if she just remembered where she was. "I don't know what you want. There are pillows and blankets in a drawer under the bed.... I think I have a mat in the trunk, or I guess I could share, he takes up more space than I do... or we could Trump you back to the castle and I could bring you back in the morning?" She gestured here

and there as she talked.

Oliver walked Tabitha over to her bed, made certain she would not fall, and slowly released her. "You need to sleep now," he said gently. "My bedroll is with my saddle. I will be quite comfortable and will be nearby if you need me. You have but to call." He studied her for a long moment. Then, "I am glad we found one another again."

"Me too." She murmured.

He carefully reached out and brushed the hair from her face, mindful of her injuries. He kissed her then, softly and quickly on the lips.

"Goodnight, Tabitha." Turning, he walked out of the tent.

"Goodnight." Her voice carried after him as he left.

Oliver walked into the open air and slowly exhaled. He saw to the needs of both horses before turning his attention to himself. When he returned, Tabitha was curled up in bed soundly sleeping.

She had fallen asleep trying to get under the covers and had only half succeeded. Her cat was looking at her as if he was trying to decide what he could do about it. The creature looked over at Oliver and stepped back off of the covers, moving to the far side of the bed and sitting.

"She's okay," Oliver whispered to the cat. He carefully reached down and pulled the covers up around her.
Tabitha didn't stir, but the cat watched him, sphinx like.

"I trust you'll watch over her," Oliver whispered to the cat. "If you need me, I'll be outside." Oliver chuckled and shook his head, realizing he was talking to a cat. A magic cat, true, but still a cat. Still, he'd done stranger things in his life.

Oliver had never forgotten the lessons he had learned as a youth in Arden. Those lessons served him well as he explored the area outside of the clearing, gathering both wood and breakfast. He left those things outside and quietly entered the tent again. Pouring himself a drink, he listened for the sounds of Tabitha's breathing. "So, cat," he whispered, "nice to meet you. I'm Oliver."

Oliver slowly lowered his hand to pet the cat, and it reached up, stretching so its nose almost touched his hand. Translucent whiskers lightly brushed against his skin before it lowered its head again.

For all its fluid form and behavior, it closely resembled the texture

of her ash staff. It was gray like weathered wood and where a cat might have had stripes or spots, it had wood grain and knots. Even its whiskers resembled flexible wood splinters.

"You are a pretty cat," Oliver said mentally tracing the grain. "I like cats. Though, no offense, my favorite cat is sleeping over there." He looked in Tabitha's direction.

"I think she's always reminded me of a cat." He shook his head then, "No, more accurately, cats remind me of her. Perhaps that's why I like them," he mused. "It's the eyes. Bright and green and curious and not to be mocked. It's the attitude. Always inquisitive and independent and warm at a whim. Never where or what you expect and tougher than you ever imagine possible. Absolutely maddening...." Oliver's trailed off and he sipped his drink.

The cat tilted its head, listening patiently and when Oliver finished, it shifted, the tail swinging out and then curling back around again as if to say 'Go on'. It seemed accustomed to listening to human dialog and willing to indulge Oliver for the moment.

A curious expression crossed Oliver's face, and then was gone. Oliver lowered himself to the ground and sat beside the cat so that he could see the bed while keeping an eye on the entrance, though he knew the horses would alert him if anything dangerous approached.

Ears straining, but not moving the rest of its body, Tabby's magic cat stretched its head as far forward as its neck would allow, sniffing at Oliver and what Oliver was drinking. Satisfied, it settled back to listen.

"I have known her for a long time." He corrected himself, "At least I've known her as well as any of us could. I don't think anyone could ever truly know her. She's that wonderful mystery that you can never quite solve but there is always a new clue to consider. If you are smart, you learn to not attempt to solve the mystery, but to simply revel in it and enjoy it for the wonderful gift that it is. Lord, it took me a long time to learn that."

Oliver sipped the drink once again and continued. "I remember clearly the day her mother brought her to Amber... Have you met her mother? Amazing woman, that."

The panther tilted its head at the question, and then lay down, stretching its front legs out and looking exactly like the statues of lions some

people like to put outside of doors and gate; all the while the tip of its tail slowly curling and uncurling, as if it were a measure of its breathing.

"It was shortly after our return from Arden and our first encounter with the Moonriders out of Ghenesh." Oliver rubbed his chin, unconsciously tracing old scars. "Bleys took Falstaff away around that time. Frankly, none of us ever missed him. He was always miserable in Amber. But Tabitha,... Tabitha walked in as though she owned the place. You should have seen her. There was this tiny little girl with that amazing hair and those incredibly big eyes," Oliver smiled. "It was the eyes that I noticed. They were so bright and full of life. They made it quite clear that she knew exactly who she was and that she was going to do as she damn well pleased. We could come along if we liked, but it was going to be her adventure."

Oliver considered his glass. "She fascinated me from the start. How could she not? She was so amazingly unique. Jake was the young troublemaker. Rhiannon was quiet, like her father. And Adela was the Princess. No one but Tabitha could bounce around the castle like a rubber ball one moment and be serious the next. She gave me fits. I wanted my world to have order. I knew how the others fit and what roles they played. But, not Tabitha. Every time I thought I at last understood her, she'd do something unexpected, something that added more depth to the picture. She was wonderful."

Oliver looked up at the tent roof as though trying to see the stars. Lowering his head again, Oliver said, "We were children together. Well, as much as I was ever a child. We all shared our lives and childhood adventures. We were all going to grow up together and make the world our own. She was there when we went to Rebma and then, that night when we went to Tir-na Nog'th. That night, everything changed."

Oliver finished his drink. "It was a long night. I was with her almost until the end. We saw things there that some of us never recovered from. I told her that she had nothing to fear, but I'm not sure she ever really believed me. I knew she could never become that ghost. I still know that. Now, more than ever." He shook his head and gathered his thoughts. "As the night wore on, things got as bad as they can get. A choice had to be made. I made it. We were children together. And suddenly, we weren't."

Oliver looked away. Unconsciously, he clenched and unclenched

his right hand. "I became an adult. Instantly. I became the person I could have grown to be in another place and another lifetime. Tabitha, fortunately, remained as she was. We saved the universe. We went home. But things were always different then, for all of us. No one knew how to treat the new adults. Adela and Volstag tried to hide it, but they felt the loss of their childhood and their innocence strongly. I had tried to warn them... And I? I lost my childhood and innocence the day Rinaldo killed my father in front of me."

His feline audience was still attentive, looking straight at him with a wise, thoughtful, measuring expression.

Looking back to the cat, Oliver said, "It was very odd for all of us. We had instantly become adults. I don't know how to explain that." Then, he chuckled softly. "Hell, you're either a cat that becomes a staff or a staff that becomes a cat. Maybe you understand after all." Then looking back to the bed he continued. "I sometimes experience feelings of déjà vu. I sometimes have very clear memories of a life I never lived. I sometimes even remember growing up. How's the poem read? 'The saddest words of tongue or pen/To know the things that might have been.'"

Oliver refilled his glass. "I remained in Amber for much of the first few years after that night. I stayed to be there for the others mostly. I watched over them and spent time with them and tried to remain their friend. As the years passed, it became difficult. Truthfully, it was hard seeing them grow up. I started to spend more and more time in Shadow. Duty called. My work kept me busy enough. It always does..."

Oliver contemplated the glass. "I came home when I could. I remember her birthday clearly. That was four or five years ago. It would have been her thirteenth birthday. I had to be there for that. She'd never have forgiven me otherwise. I'd never have forgiven myself. She was already growing up and I knew she'd be beautiful one day. Her ghost was. Though she's growing now to be more beautiful still."

Oliver downed his drink with one swallow. "Damn. I had no idea how much I missed her."

Tabitha's companion lifted to his feet and circled him, rubbing against his arm. It looked up at Oliver with a steady gaze as if it understood, and then went to lay next to Tabitha.

Oliver went outside, bedding down beneath the stars. Scanning the heavens for familiar constellations, he considered the night. But other than the bats flying overhead, the only creature up and about was Tabitha's familiar. It wandered out, stopping to investigate Oliver as if it couldn't understand why the human was sleeping outside.

"Yes, I know," Oliver said as the cat examined him, "I'm an idiot."

Sometime later, as the cat prowled past again, Oliver sat up.

"Bloody hell!" Oliver swore. "Witch. Cat. Familiar. Bloody fool." he chastised himself. The cat had no comment and, all things considered, Oliver thought that was for the best. He laid back down to sleep, though he was less content than he had been.

Oliver awoke early in the morning. He stretched, noted a not unexpected tenderness among his injuries. "Idiot." He bathed and dressed and went about preparations for breakfast.

The horses had moved off a bit to graze, both of them enjoying the meadow grass, and the cat was lying in the sun, stretched out flat on its side. It lifted its head to regard Oliver and then put it down again, unconcerned. Near it lay a rabbit with striped fur that had an odd but very logical tinge of green to it.

Oliver set about cleaning the rabbit and preparing breakfast. He removed cooking gear from his bags and built a small fire.

He entered the tent to quietly rummage for cooking gear—plates, silverware and mugs for the coffee—and then he stopped by Tabitha's bed to check on her. She was still sleeping, curled up in the middle of the bed and turned sideways so that if she stretched out, her head and feet would hang over the sides.

Oliver smiled, watching her sleep, and then left the tent to prepare breakfast. As he cooked, he pondered the night before. "Idiot," he said and shook his head.

He was rejoined by the cat, which sat next to him. It was followed by the sound of moving cloth as Tabitha stepped outside. She had wrapped herself in one of her sheets instead of getting dressed and was blinking painfully against the morning light. She tottered forward, still half asleep, and stopped right behind her familiar.

"Good morning." She finally turned to look at Oliver. "That

smells good."

"Good morning, Tabitha," Oliver smiled cheerfully. "Breakfast will be ready shortly. Coffee?"

"Mmmm... a bit. If I have too much I get all shaky and talk too fast and he races around and gets all jumpy," She looked down and addressed the cat as it twisted its head to look up at her. "Yes, you. He must like you..." She said looking back up at Oliver.

"We had a long talk last night," Oliver replied, offering her a mug of coffee.

"Then he really likes you. With most people he goes staff form and won't come out. He thinks he's being sly... hiding like a little kid who thinks that if they cover their eyes you can't see them." She grinned, gazing fondly at the feline who met her eyes calmly.

"Then I feel honored," he said with a sincere smile. "I must have bored him to tears last night. But be that as it may, breakfast is nearly ready. Would M'Lady care to dine here or shall I bring her breakfast into the tent?"

"Here is nice, the sun feels good." She stood back up, still smiling. She tucked the sheet around herself so there weren't any drafts and sat down.

Once she was settled, Oliver offered her a plate. Breakfast looked suspiciously like a large omelet and some fresh fruit. "Your breakfast, M'Lady."

"Thank you sir, you are too kind." She smiled up at Oliver. "And I have to ask... What made you sleep outside?"

Oliver actually looked embarrassed. "I didn't want to further impose on your hospitality or make you uncomfortable as you were already under a great deal of physical and emotional stress. The simplest solution seemed to be sleeping outside."

Tabitha laughed and the cat rolled its head to look over at him. "I'm willing to share my bed and you think I'd have worried about sharing my tent? You really are too sweet."

Few living people had ever seen Oliver blush. Tabitha suddenly found herself among them.

"At least it's not because my tent smells. But tonight, you sleep

inside," Tabitha informed him, still. She glanced briefly at him and waved him to sit next to her. "Please. Sit. Between the washing, the cooking and the standing you're going to make me feel guilty."

"I could never have that on my conscience." He flashed a dazzling smile and sat beside her. He sipped his coffee and ate a bite of his omelet. Gesturing toward the cat, Oliver inquired, "So, tell me about the cat. He knows all of my secrets whereas I know none of his."

"Baliu, are you keeping secrets?" The cat glanced back over its shoulder at Tabitha, clearly not having any idea what she could be talking about. It turned away again, its ears twitching to indicate that it was still listening to them.

"I guess we've been together... two years now? No, I guess it's almost three. I'd been here a little bit... in this Shadow, just south of here and I started going east toward where Rrarid is and then heard tales and myths and things and thought I'd go west instead. So I went *way* west, which is hard to do because it's a lot of desert and mountains and stuff.... but, anyway, I went and found a whole different kingdom who are all descendants of the same people as Rrarid's, but these stayed in the same place. There was a war and the kingdom split so at least some of them would survive, at least, I think that was the logic."

Tabitha waved her hand, dismissing the relevance of the detail for the purpose of her story.

"Their witchcraft is... broader... a lot like sorcery but with herbalism and healing and shamanic elements all mixed in. It was fascinating and the headmistress said that she would take me in, which Mother wasn't so sure about." Tabitha confessed the last part with a very small shrug, and Oliver smiled sympathetically, visualizing Fiona's reaction.

"Part of it, once you graduate from the first level, is that you have to find your familiar. They've a ceremony and they only do one person a day, so that whole day is yours... It's like it's your birthday, except you're waiting to be born..." Her face was animated, and she looked at him intently, wanting him to understand what it was like.

Oliver listened to her voice and observed her expressions with obvious interest and nodded.

"There is a courtyard open on eight sides so that our path is not

blocked, and the Masters gather with you at the center, but they don't just send you off. They go into how you are, and how you will be..." her voice trailed off, as her mind replayed the scene she could not fully describe.

"And then, it's like a geas, you can't stop yourself... you don't even want to." She laughed then, tossing back her head. "One of the boys, when his turn came, walked out of the courtyard and wandered in a big circle in the field right near the school. It was so peculiar. But then a girl looked up, and there was a hawk high overhead, just drifting in the wind and watching him. She made him walk in circles for an hour before she came down to greet him! Another girl walked out, and went beneath the trees along the garden... tiptoeing from one to another as if someone had hidden candy in between the gnarled tangle of roots... but I saw a squirrel up in the branches. Not the silly little gray things they have here, but a big red one, like a fox. Sometimes you wonder who people will be with... and it might sound strange, to hear that a girl ended up with a squirrel, but when you know them, and you stop to think about how they're different and how they're the same, it makes a great deal of sense. You realize that they couldn't have gotten anyone else." She looked at Oliver, wanting him to understand that as well, the rightness of it.

Oliver's dark eyes watched Tabitha with a startling intensity.

"When my turn came and we'd gone through the ritual, I couldn't leave at first. No matter that we were done, it wasn't time. Which was very odd, I know, because no one else did that and the Masters were worried that something had gone wrong and one girl was afraid that maybe I didn't have a familiar, but it wasn't any of that." She had a smile on her face, still amazed.

"It was like some piece of me, some part of my soul, had shot out like an arrow from a bow, and it didn't make any sense to move yet, because I didn't know yet where it had landed. So I waited... listening, for that feel when it found who I was meant for; and the next thing I knew, I was running as fast as I could. I was out of the courtyard and passing under the garden arch and it didn't matter what was in front of me but I knew I had a rather long way to go." She was staring off into the air ahead of her, remembering, and Baliu came to lean against her.

"I ran a very long way... but it didn't matter if you were tired or

thirsty, because until you've been found, it's the greater need, and so you just keep going. I was climbing up and he was climbing down and suddenly there we were, nose to nose. We'd been going so hard and so fast that we almost ran into each other. We were quite startled, but then we were so happy. Like you get back a piece of yourself that you hadn't realized you were missing until then." She ran her hand along Baliu and he looked up at her.

"It was quite amazing. That furry gray face... his whole body the color of clouds... I miss you being so cuddly sometimes." She smiled a little sadly and kissed the top of his head. "All in all, it's worked out quite well for us."

While she told her tale, Oliver sat silently, studying her voice, her expressions, and her movements, delighted by each new expression or tone or gesture.

"I'm happy you found each other. I am glad you are not alone," he said with an intense sincerity. "You deserve the happiness, Tabitha."

"Thank you." Her smile was briefly radiant and she and Baliu stared at each other for a moment, and then she laughed. "How he ended up furless is a separate story, of course."

She let it go then, shaking her head, and returned to her breakfast.

Oliver likewise returned to his breakfast, as relaxed and happy as ever Tabitha had seen him.

"I've been wondering," he said after some time, "what are M'Lady's plans for this lovely day?"

"A bath," Tabitha gestured toward her cat, "before he starts complaining that I smell. I was wondering if you needed to get back to where you were going to?"

"My time is my own."

"Well, then, kindly sir, we have a very relaxing day ahead of us." She smiled at him and leaned to bump him with her shoulder.

Baliu turned to look at the humans behind him with an amused and lofty air. He stood, walking around Tabitha until he was between her and Oliver. He leaned into her, his paws on Oliver's leg. He simply rested there for a few heartbeats, bridging the space between them, and then he sauntered away to lay in the shade.

Oliver laughed and shook his head at Baliu's behavior. "Cats."

Tabitha had an indulgent smile on her face and nodded.

Oliver poured himself more coffee. "I believe I will go for a brief walk and give you some privacy."

"There is a spot over there I like." She gestured with her fork toward the stream, not turning to look at him. "Avoid it, or not, as you like."

Oliver managed to maintain a straight face as he lowered the coffee mug.

"That," Oliver said, "was dangerously close to an invitation, M'Lady."

"Maybe it was." She replied. "But now you are informed. And while it may not be for me to give orders, there will be no accidents."

"I don't believe in accidents," Oliver said instinctively. Then, he shook his head, and in not quite a whisper sighed, "Idiot."

He turned to regard her fully. He smiled at the way her hair shone in the sunlight. Wearing the sheet she reminded him of nothing so much as a wild-eyed and beautiful fey.

"Were you always this beautiful, Tabitha?" Oliver asked finally. She cocked her head to look at him, with an air of having been surprised by the question.

"I think that is in the eye of the beholder. Once I was gangly and skinny with entirely too many freckles, but I still thought I was cute, just as I have always known you were dashing." She reached out and brushed a single finger beneath his chin, as if to tilt his head up.

Oliver watched her eyes sparkling in the morning sunlight. "I never thought of you as gangly or too skinny. I remember a tiny little girl with amazing hair and incredibly big eyes," Oliver smiled. "I remember the day we first met and it was your eyes that captivated me. They were so bright and full of life. If anything, they are brighter now and have hidden depths the sea should envy. No," Oliver said, "you were never gangly or too thin. You were never anything less than exhilarating."

"You are too kind." She turned away, self-conscious, but smiling.

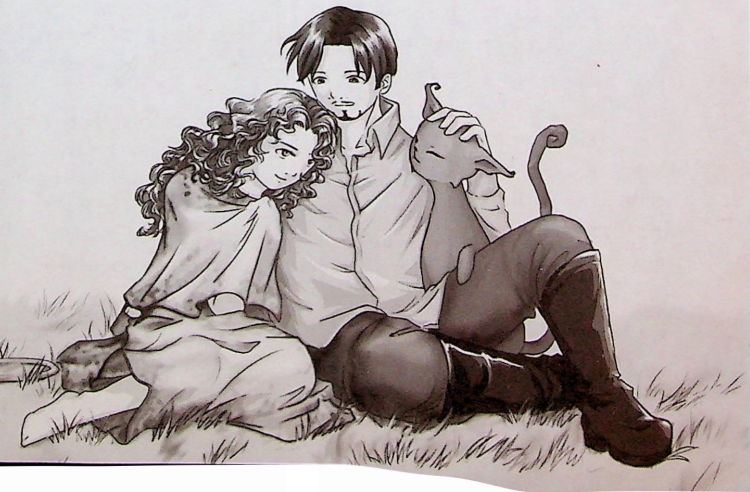
"I remember the day we met..." Tabitha's gaze turned inward, looking back to that day. "I'd run off to explore while mother was talking to

someone, setting up my room I think, but I'd lost interest. I'd gotten lost, and was rather displeased about that, when I heard voices. I couldn't imagine the sort of person who would belong to a voice that big, so I peeked between the banister columns to look down and see who it might be. There was this mountain of a man who looked as if maybe he'd just arrived, and this other man who looked so much smaller. I didn't know either one of them, so I ran for the stairs to introduce myself, but they'd walked off when I got there, so I went looking for them. I heard the giant man laugh and had just reached the courtyard when you came up the other way, except I had no idea who you were either. You seemed rather surprised when I walked up to introduce myself. I think Uncle Gérard and Random thought it was equally amusing."

Tabitha shook her head and laughed, "Mother was so annoyed, and she still doesn't understand why I hadn't asked one of the staff to bring me back to her. But to do that would have ruined the adventure."

She chucked, enjoying the reminiscing.

"The adventure," Oliver repeated with a slight grin. "You know, I knew from the moment we met that you were going to do as you damn well pleased whenever you pleased. Oh, the rest of us could come along if we



liked, but it was going to be your adventure. I remember my childhood being dark and determined." Oliver sadly smiles at that. "I suppose that hasn't changed really. But, you, you were an elemental force turned loose. You were wonderful."

"And you, I think, are trying to make me blush." She turned away bashfully.

"Flattery," he said quietly, "is flattery only when it isn't true."

"Life needn't always be so dark." She reached up, brushing his cheek with her fingers, the contact emphasizing her words. "But perhaps that is why we get along so well, my light to your dark like opposite ends of magnet."

There was a bump at Oliver's elbow as Baliu came up on his other side and nudged his way under Oliver's arm. Solid and compact, he leaned against Oliver as if they were old friends as he gazed out across the meadow. It was an act motivated by more than simple acceptance and Tabitha smiled fondly at the two of them.

Oliver carefully placed his hand on Baliu's head and gently petted the great cat.

"He has excellent taste." Approving her familiar's behavior, she carefully held her plate while she scooted over, closing the space between them and leaning as Baliu was.

"Now we've got you." She teased mildly, smiling up at him.

Oliver leaned over and placed a quick soft kiss on Tabitha's lips. "For as long as you'll both have me, M'Lady."

"I think that will be a rather long time," Tabitha whispered as she reached up to catch the side of his face to draw him back to her for a kiss that wasn't so quick.

Bridgette Ruggles:

Oliver and Tabitha were created for John Davies's *Nightfall* trilogy which ran at ACUS in '00, '01 and '02. We loved them so much we just kept writing.

Bridgette Ruggles's previous occupations have been shelved while she works on a stay-at-home mom degree in child psychology and development. Interests include hiking, traveling and SCUBA diving, which all end up as fodder for Amber.

Christopher Kindred:

A native of Las Vegas, Christopher Kindred has stalked its neon-lit streets as a journalist, a private investigator, a political consultant, and a teacher. A collector of lost causes, Christopher always has one more windmill at which to tilt.

Lizete De Assis:

I was born in Macau (now a dependency of the People's Republic of China) in 1984. I am now a student in computer science in France. Since I was a kid, I have been watching Japanese animation series with my big sister, who also introduced me to drawing. My love for anime has only been growing since, with notably *Sailor Moon* and CLAMP's manga, but also video games like *Final Fantasy*. Presently, with the CMIJ, a group founded with other artists, I work on projects decided by our common passions. I love reading, Amber DRPG, online CRPGs... Those are the inspirations for my illustrations, which you can find on http://ppdm.free.fr

Isle of Regret

By Trent Zelazny

Sometimes I wake up from dreams in which my father has played a role. For a few seconds I truly believe he is alive, or has returned. More times than I can count I've woken up just after hugging him, and no matter how many times this happens, once my conscious mind takes over and reveals the painful truth, the emptiness I feel inside is immeasurable.

I have accepted my father's death, though I have never gotten over it. Maybe one reason I've had so much trouble is that his books are everywhere. Right now I can just turn to the shelf behind me and find no less than fifty paperbacks with his name on them. I am a huge fan of his work, my friends are fans of his work—people read my last name, and sometimes they ask me if I'm related to the writer. These kinds of things might possibly stagger the process, I don't know. It could also be a number of regrets I have. Regrets about how I dealt with things when he was sick—how the whole family did, maybe. I do have to chalk at least some of it up to that I was a somewhat dysfunctional, self-absorbed teenager. I wasn't there for him—or Jane—like I should have been. With all of my other problems at the time (now pointless by comparison) I was in heavy denial. I did not believe that my father was going to die. Or I really did not want to believe it.

With the exception of a couple of pieces, I did not read my father's work while he was alive. Within a month after his death, I picked up *Nine Princes in Amber*, hoping that, in some way, it might help me hold on to him. To an extent I was successful, but moreso, the book just blew me away. I immediately read *Guns of Avalon*, then *Sign of the Unicorn*, and so on, and began to fantasize about living in Amber, training with Benedict or riding with Julian through the forests of Arden. I became obsessed with the series (hell, my son's name is Corwin Random), and then eventually moved on to his other books. I have a special fondness for *The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth*, *Dream Master*, and *My Name is Legion*.

Lonesome October is up there too. I found a love for his writing, as well as a newfound love for the man. I regret not reading his work while he was around. I regret never being able to toss one of his books down in front of him and say, "This rocks." I regret that I never got to tell him how proud I am of him.

But to hell with regret. He lived through it. I lived through it. And years later, even though I wasn't actually reading his work, we were able to talk about creativity, specifically music and writing. It was great. The man seemed to know everything, or at least something about anything. As we had these almost nightly conversations, me sitting on a stool, him lying on the couch, I grew to understand how great and important he was; and once I had read his books and stories—him being my father aside—he became one of the biggest influences on my own work. I have many influences, but when people ask me who the biggest are, I typically list three: Donald Westlake, Joe Lansdale, and Roger Zelazny.

I touched upon this in another piece I just wrote, as yet unpublished, but I think it is important to share again. When we are kids, our parents are the most important people in the whole world. They are our providers. They take care of us. In a sense, they are gods. However, at some point, when we enter into our all-important teenage years, some inane part of us comes to this bizarre understanding that our parents are not cool. They become, in a sense, dorks. I don't know why this is, do you? If you did not have this view as a teenager, you are a very special, rare breed. Most every kid I know did this.

Fortunately for me, even if I had this outlook, my father and I still had a connection. A connection of creativity (that and, somewhere inside, I did actually know that he was totally cool). We talked more and more about life and what it meant. We talked about anything, really. When I got into the Beatles and the Monkees and Led Zeppelin, he already knew all about them. We philosophized, joked around, and drank too much Pepsi. He read me bits from the musical he wrote, read me excerpts from *A Night in the Lonesome October* while it was still scribbled on legal pads.

When he passed away and I began truly experiencing his work, I got in touch with him like I never had before. It was clearly Roger, but it was a Roger like I'd never seen. It was a Roger that not only knew about all the

wonders, but had created a lot of them himself. It was so totally cool.

As time goes by, I've learned that, at least in my life, things often come full circle, because my father is still the most important person to me in the world. He is my hero, and I miss him dearly.

I still have the dreams. I often ask myself if it is just a dream, or is he dropping in to say hello. I guess, really, it doesn't matter. I get to see him every now and then, and from time to time we're back on the stool and the couch, chatting it up.

I'm pleased that the work he created has influenced so many other writers and has entertained so many people. I sometimes wonder, if I had been truly aware of how cool and important he was when I was a self-centered doofus teenager, would things have been different?

I regret to say I'll never know...

But to hell with regret.

Roger, here's to you, man.

Cheers.

Trent Zelazny:

Trent Zelazny started building a literary career in 1999 with "Hope is an Inanimate Desire," in the anthology "Cemetery Sonata" in 1999, and with his "Harold Asher and His Vomiting Dogs" taking second place in the annual Killer Frog contest. Since then he's been published in the "Shadow of the Marquis" webzine, "Psrhea Magazine", the "House of Pain" webzine, and various anthologies. He is also the father of Roger Zelazny's first grandchild, Corwin Random Zelazny.

RELATIONS

inspired by a campaign by Graeme Smith
By Melissa Garber
Illustrated by Amelie Belcher

Belissa sighed.

It had happened again.

A few minutes ago Darriel, her youngest son, had come skulking home and made straight for his room, sidling past her without a word and ducking his head to hide the bruises she knew were there. Now his sister Gilva—at twelve, his elder by two years—stood before her, face flushed with excitement. "We gave Brettin and Farolan a good pounding," Gilva said; but Belissa knew her children better than that. What had actually happened was that Brettin and Farolan had been tormenting Darriel, and Gilva had rescued him.

Again.

Gilva mistook the reason for her silence and added, "We fought them fair, mother!"

"Of course you did," Belissa said, forcing a cheerful tone. "Now you might want to go out to the stables, love."

"What for?"

"Because Vashiel is about to feed his snowcat."

Gilva adored that snowcat. She squealed with delight and ran out, leaving Belissa alone with her thoughts. Right now her thoughts weren't very good company. What would become of the boy? He would never be the model warrior, the perfect Hendrake child her husband had so hoped for. Darriel just wasn't cut out for fighting. That in itself wasn't an

insurmountable obstacle, even in this battle-mad House; after all, Vashiel was only a passable swordsman, and had no skill to speak of in weaponless combat. But Vashiel at least had his sorcery. So far Darriel had shown no interest in that path, in spite of all the time he spent with Vashiel and with Mandor of Sawall.

She sighed again. The trouble was in her blood, she knew; it was

her Minobee heritage that showed in these two sons. All her other children were—or had been, she thought, remembering Borel with a pang—Hendrake to the core. Even Gilva was already quite a wrestler and had recently put her heart into her swordplay.

But Darriel ... Darriel wouldn't put his heart into anything: not the fighting ways of Hendrake, nor the sorcery his more-than-half-brother had adopted, nor even the less tangible psychic disciplines of her Minobee kin. He had no advantage, and with each defeat he grew more sullen and distant—especially when Gilva intervened as she so often did. The girl meant well, of course, and was only defending her brother; but Darriel had absorbed enough of the Hendrake code of honor to resent being rescued from what he perceived as his fight.

Her train of thought was broken by a yelp of pain from outside. She rushed to the window.

A reluctant Gilva was effortlessly holding Darriel pinned while their father gazed sternly on. As Belissa watched, the combatants got to their feet, faced off, and came together in a brief scuffle that ended with Darriel on his back some feet away. Gilva looked apologetic. Denek's expression never changed.

"Enough of this," Belissa muttered, turning from the window. Let Denek think he could force the boy onto his path. She knew better. Something at Mandorways commanded the boy's attention, and he was too young for it to be Mandor's ward. Belissa was on good terms with Mandor; and while one could never completely trust the man, if he had grown fond of her son—which he must have, to allow Darriel on his estate so often and so long—then he might be willing to give her some useful insight.

That was it, then. She shifted to her human form, to match Mandor who preferred to wear his at home; and after donning appropriate garb she took out the Trump that he himself had made.

He was reading in his study. Belissa smiled. He was always reading in his study. She, for one, had learned not to let this fool her into thinking he was predictable. He raised those startlingly blue eyes and returned her smile. "Dearest Belissa. You do me honor, as always."

"Mandor," she purred, "it occurs to me that neither of us has guested the other in weeks. We have to remedy this."

"Agreed. Had you planned to have me there? If it's all the same to you, I have an experiment ready that I think you'd like to try."

She pursed her lips, toyed with her glasses. An affectation, of course; her eyesight was perfect; but it amused her—at least this decade—to feign this small weakness. "Experiment?"

Mandor didn't quite grin—his carefully cultivated reserve wouldn't allow it—but his smile widened a trifle. "I've adopted a new hobby: culinary magic."

"Well!" She shook her head in mock disapproval. "Mandor has decorated his estate with his own hands, and I understand his spells keep it clean. Now he prepares his own food. What shall be left for his servants to do?" Laughing, she extended a hand. "Of course I'll try it. Mandor a cook! That would lure me even if I hadn't already wanted to visit."

"Come then." He brought her through, and together they walked down to the dining room, exchanging gossip that continued into the meal: Gramble was still unwell, but seemed to be enjoying a period of strength; he really had adopted Merlin, as she'd heard; no, Gilva had not thrown Chinaway in a training match, but she had managed to trip him twice; and so on. The flow of small talk was broken only by Belissa's occasional exclamation over this course or that. Mandor really had outdone himself; she wondered—privately, of course—how long he had practiced this supposedly new skill before judging it fit to display.

"Ah, you do like this one? Darriel suggested you might."

A brief smile played across her lips. "He knows me better than I thought, then." Knows you better too, old snake, if you go to him for advice about me. "Darriel spends quite a bit of time here, doesn't he?"

"Oh, yes. He and Eila are nearly inseparable. Sometimes I almost believe they think as one. You should see them—they're really adorable together." Mandor's eyes narrowed just a touch as he continued: "If this keeps up, Eila may bear your grandchildren someday."

Serpent forbid! Even considering her youth, Eila was far too flighty for Belissa's liking. But she said only, "I promise that if my son declares his undying love for your ward, you will hear of it." It did not require Minobian training to see that Mandor noted the implied threat; a good thing, for Belissa had been about as successful a Minobee as Darriel was a Hendrake. This

was the opening she had been waiting for; she stepped into it: "Actually, I came here for his sake."

Mandor leaned slightly forward. "Do tell."

"Well, it's ..." Suddenly uncertain, she paused. "Can I be frank with you?"

He caught the distinction she had made—*can*, not *may*—for he answered the underlying question: whether it was safe for her to trust him. "Who argued for the dual marriage all three of you wanted? We may not have won, but I think you'll agree it wasn't for lack of trying. And—" He hesitated; she could see him weighing it, truth for truth—"I like Darriel. If I may help him, I will."

May, not *can*. Well done, old snake. "It's simple, really," she assured him. "I'm worried about him. He won't get involved in anything. Oh, I knew he was no warrior—but he doesn't seem interested in anything else, either. And he's beginning to suffer for it." Inwardly she cursed her Minobee heritage. It had left Borel, Chinaway, and Gilva untouched; Vashiel had found his way in spite of its strong expression in him; but Darriel seemed crippled by it, and she couldn't help thinking it was somehow her fault.

Mandor, she realized, was waiting patiently for her to continue. She forced her attention back to the conversation and pondered her next words. "Something draws him here," she said at last. "I need to know what it is."

"Knowledge." Belissa frowned; Mandor spread his hands. "Knowledge, pure and simple. He enjoys learning, especially about how reality is made. Why, I've lost track of the times he's asked me to tell him about the Logrus. And about ways. And anything I might know about the Pattern."

Belissa felt the color drain from her face. "The Pattern? My son?"

"It's nothing to be alarmed about, Belissa. The world is a jigsaw puzzle. Darriel simply wants to know where he fits in." He regarded her thoughtfully. "To tell the truth, you'd probably do as well to talk to Suhuy as to me."

"To Suhuy!" Could any other surprises wait for her?

"Oh, yes. He sneaks over there from here all the time. He thinks I don't notice. Eila goes along sometimes, and neither of them says a word

about it afterwards."

"But—to Suhuy! He's far too young!"

"Not to learn," came the calm reply. "When it comes to the quest for understanding, there's no such thing as too young. And Darriel's far too intelligent to actually attempt anything before he's ready."

There was a pause while Belissa digested this; then Mandor asked, "Would you like to speak to Suhuy? I know the ways."

"No," she said slowly. "No. If he feels a need to keep these meetings secret, then let them stay that way. For now, it's enough just to know he's working towards something."

Mandor nodded. "He certainly is. I'd wager he'll make the Shadowmasters' Guild at sixteen—maybe even earlier." With a wave of his hand the table was cleared. "I think you're making the right choice—if I may be so bold as to say so."

"You certainly may," she said as she rose and readied her Trump of home. The air of candor in the room prompted her to add, "For I know why you argued my case so strongly," as she disappeared.

She stepped into the Great Hall thoroughly pleased: not only did she no longer fear for her son's future, but she had the immense satisfaction of being the first person in well over a century to see Mandor blush.

But Darriel was to surprise her even further.

The next white sky, all of Hendrake was woken by Brettin's roaring. It seemed he'd had a nightmare, and his favorite tunic—a gift from his father, Chinaway—had suffered for it. He brought it to Belissa and asked, with unexpected politeness, if it could be fixed.

She would never be sure just why she did it; perhaps subliminally she had caught the scent. For whatever reason, as she turned the shapeless mass in her hands, on a sudden impulse she made a microscopic alteration in the skin of one finger and then ran it down one of the rips, storing a sample for later analysis.

She pronounced her verdict—the tunic was irreparable—and sent her grandson on his sulky way. Then she settled down and made her finger smell-sensitive. It told her what on some level she had already known.

Brettin hadn't made those tears. Darriel had.

But Brettin wouldn't miss an opportunity to make his younger uncle

look bad, so he must honestly believe that he had done the damage himself. Which made no sense, unless—

What had Mandor said? Eila never mentioned her visits to Suhuy? Hardly like her usual chattering self. And she and Darriel were always doing things together, neither one growing bored with the other's suggestions. "Sometimes I almost believe they think as one." What if one were thinking for both?

What if that one had thought for Brettin as well? A quickly established control would have left Chinaway's son no choice but to believe whatever Darriel wanted him to believe. And this with no training, no encouragement—only the psychic gift that had skipped a generation to manifest in him.

Her son—*her son* was a Minobee!

Belissa's laughter echoed through all the Ways of Hendrake.

Melissa Garber:

Melissa "M'liss" Garber is a longtime roleplayer and a copy editor of children's textbooks. Originally from New Jersey, she now lives in Orlando, Florida, with her husband, Graeme Smith, whom she first met in a Champions game. Graeme and M'liss are the servants of four cats: two long-standing housemates, Isis and Nugget, and two recent additions, Mandor and Merlin.

Graeme ran the nameless campaign in which M'liss played Darriel, her first and favorite Amber PC. The writing of "Relations" was actually a break from work on the log of the first four game sessions—a log that turned into a 150-page novel. "Relations" was a chance to get a glimpse of Darriel from a different perspective, before he'd picked up the polished manners that marked his adulthood.

M'liss has attended several ADRPG cons and is known to attendees of Courts of Chaos Con and A Far Southern Shadow for her Amber filks, including the theme song of Courts of Chaos Con 2000. CCC2K also saw the first appearance of "Relations," in Working Chaos, the con fiction book; the Good People of CCC have been kind enough to allow it to be reprinted here. (Thanks, folks!)

Amelie Belcher:

Amelie Belcher, a native of Louisiana, actually lives in a world of her own. Before becoming a Professional Art School Drop Out she wanted to be a teacher, so she could shape young minds into cool stuff like dinosaurs and rockets. Now she travels the South illustrating for various organizations at Anime conventions and Renaissance Festivals. More of her work can be seen at Cordeval.com. Race you there.

WHAT LIES WITHIN

By Karen Brazil
Illustrated by Cody Collins

Tanda is Gérard's daughter in ***Deconstructing Patterns****, a face-to-face game run by Paul Robbins. "What Lies Within" was a diary contribution describing what happened to Tanda after a tragic end to one of the group's searches for items of power needed to control the renegade Pattern.*

I had fought too long and too hard to let this battle be my demise – not without first giving as fierce a fight as I could. Day and night, visions haunted me, of Adam's bloody shirt, torn to shreds, hanging from the demon's long talons. I wanted the torment to cease. But the memories would never leave me, not until I found and saved him.

Entering this world at a frantic pace, I had barely noticed the slap of the tall grass against my boots. Nor the sweet odor of honey as I dragged air into my burning lungs. I had thrashed my way through the swaying, yellow expanse blanketing the land. Through sparsely clustered trees, hunched together like old cottages, their leaves blurring into a golden streak as I charged past – vaguely I was aware the red hue of their branches clashed with the mauve sky. My focus was centered on a tendril of energy carving a path across the Shadow ahead of me.

The wild chase had ended at the shores of the lake it sought. Seen through my psychic perceptions, the evanescent tendril of energy writhed and twisted before me, as I held it several feet above the surface. The wide expanse of water appeared outwardly calm, but from within those dark depths emanated an elemental power, lapping over me in languid waves. I sensed

the tendril's yearning to wrap around and absorb the energy, its desire to take the power back to its source – a metallic artifact, shaped as a pyramid – in another world where I had left it.

The tendril thrashed wildly about, snapping right, left, up, diving down toward me, frantically trying to free itself from my mind's iron grip. I screamed my defiance. The white-hot band of pain in my head tightened with every agonizing moment that passed. But this was my last hope. I had done everything I could to find Adam, and it had all been in vain.

"No!" *I will not fail!*

Through the psychic contact, I felt its cold indifference to my cry, sensed its arrogant self-confidence – exulting as it held me in a deadly embrace. It seared my mind with the certainty that it only needed a few moments more to sap my remaining strength, and then it could drink deeply of the lake's power – and my own. Anger surged forth within me and renewed my determination. I snatched at the stray strands of my long black hair that lashed across my face. Adam was alive. I was absolutely sure of that. I would bend the artifact to my will; use it to seek him wherever he was lost. I had failed to protect him when he needed me most, left him to a fate he did not deserve. Memories of his smile, his infectious laughter, his passion for life, were all that kept me going – I vowed to do whatever necessary to see them again.

I had long ago lost track of the seconds, minutes, hours I had struggled against the tendril. It tore at my mind, ripped and stretched my sanity as it made another powerful attempt to wrench free of my hold. I gasped. Sharp needles of ice landed on my face and hands; vibrations beneath my feet as a crash of thunder reverberated though the ground; a freezing, squalling wind stole my ragged breath. I shut the invading world out, let none of the sensations bombarding my body cause me to loose my grip on the tendril.

The stalemate could not continue for much longer, I knew I would break before it did. I resolved to make one final attempt to lock it down. As I gathered all my energy for this last effort, a new presence brushed lightly across my mind. It felt warm and familiar, and for a moment, I was caught in it. The pain of the struggle lessened and my mind drifted to a memory I had blotted out in my time of grief.

I was walking the corridors of Argent, the swish of my long silken gown was an unfamiliar sound to my ears. The colors were my own, but my usual attire includes breeches and cloak of a forest green, trimmed with a deep gold to match a light shirt. I had returned from journeying through Shadow that morning, and it was a simple pleasure to dress so differently. It felt strange, though, not to have the weight of my sword on my hip, but I would not give up the precious moments I had been granted to hold my son in my arms. Aodhan was then only three months old, eyes wide with wonder and green like mine, his creamy skin pale next to my lightly tanned arms. I whispered to him and smiled as he reached up to touch my chin.

"Let's see if we can find Merlin. Where do you think he might be?" My lady in waiting had told me he was in residence. Many months had passed since last we had met, and I wanted to find him, say hello, and catch up.

When I found him, in one of the smaller dining rooms he had converted into a temporary office, the door was open, and a waft of rich freshly ground coffee welcomed me as I entered quietly. He looked up from behind a large desk, his handsome face pinched with tiredness, and I fully expected a polite, but curt greeting. My cousin had abdicated the throne of Chaos when the houses had declared war on Amber. I did not know the details of the situation, or where he had hidden in Shadow, but the experience had changed him, tempered his light spirit and easy nature. It is, perhaps, the price of wearing such a crown.

He waved me forward. As I approached, he rose and I noted his taut frame clothed formally in his colors. He came around the desk and stood before me. I was pleasantly surprised to see a rare smile find his lips as he looked down at Aodhan.

"So this is the new edition to our family," he spoke softly, lightly brushing his fingers over Aodhan's cheek. "Ah, wait a moment, I have something for him," he turned back to the desk, reached across it and picked up a multicolored, hexagonal object. It looked like a complex puzzle, and I

sensed sorcerous energies about it. I watched Merlin hold it out to my son, and smiled when Aodhan batted it with his tiny hand. When he grasped it, Merlin let go, and my mouth fell open in surprise as the edges of the object blurred, parts of it shrank, others enlarged and smoothed, until it was three small intertwined loops – red, green and blue. Aodhan gurgled happily, gripping the blue circle and pushing it part way into his mouth. I laughed with delight and looked up at Merlin, smiling warmly at him.

"Wow, thanks Merlin. That's amazing."

His cheeks flushed faintly. "I had some time to myself," he said, "and thought I'd make him a gift." He watched my face as I studied the rings, and anticipated my question. "It will change again if anyone else takes it, and the complexity of the shapes will increase with the awareness of the holder."

"Amazing..." I wanted to try it out, but my son did not look like he wanted to give it up anytime soon – even to his mother. I savored the precious moment, watching Aodhan's wondrous expression as he shook the toy, its hoops clanking together, and when I glanced up, I saw Merlin watching us both with a half smile. Wondering what he was thinking, but unsure I could ask such a personal question, I said instead, "I did not expect to see you in Argent."

"My father asked me to return, so he could attend to business elsewhere in Shadow, and no," he met my gaze fully, and a look of amusement crossed his face, "I can't tell you anything about it, other than he'll be gone for an extended period."

I chuckled softly, then nodded. "Fair enough. It's just good to see you again, it has been a long time." At my words, a look of sorrow flitted across his features and his charming smile was gone. I almost reached out to hold his arm, to offer comfort, but I held back, unsure of his reaction. A thought occurred to me then. "You know, Adam and I are going into the city for dinner and whatever entertainment we can find. Come with us, it'll be fun – I guarantee it." I grinned, and for a moment, there was an interest and keenness in his eyes, but it was gone as swiftly as it had come. He shook his head.

"No – thank you for the offer, and I'm sure we'll have fun together soon, but I have a diplomatic dinner to attend, to cement political relations

with Serra." His voice was level, face unreadable – he seemed to have switched off emotionally. "Speaking of which," he continued, glancing to his desk, "I really must finish this paperwork before then. You guys have a good time." His stern façade cracked a little as he looked down again on Aodhan. Then the tenderness was gone, his simple pleasure at my son's innocent happiness merely a fleeting memory.

Anger surged within me. I would allow nothing to distract me from my purpose!

Shoving the presence aside, I drew on my energy, my despair and loss; gathered it all for one final assault and launched my power at the tendril. My psyche wrapped about it, crushing it, and finally I felt it grow still. I roared in exultation. I had succeeded!

Again, the presence entered my mind. Furious at this second intrusion, I started to block it, but it was not so gentle this time. It slammed down on my connection to the tendril, severing it ruthlessly, and fierce pain exploded in my head. My mind recoiled in shock. But my body reacted instinctively – fist balled, arm drawn back, I spun on one foot, the other stepping forward, carrying my weight through my hips as I began to lash out at my aggressor behind me.

A familiar voice snapped a single word. I did not recognize it, but its effect was instantaneous. My muscles sagged, and I started to fall. An arm caught me around my shoulders, and another swept behind my knees, lifting me before I hit the ground.

The paralysis wore off quickly and I struggled, but the arms held me easily, my body exhausted from my efforts to contain the tendril. I looked up at my assailant.

"Merlin?"

He ignored me, his focus on the lake.

My mind reeled. How could he do this to me! I shook my head to clear it of the residue of his cantrip – it was only then that I became aware of the chaos all about.

Heavy sheets of rain swept across the stormy lake. Vortexes formed on the water, the straw-like grass flattened by the gusting wind. The stocky trees were stripped of their leaves, which swarmed like bats in the air. My cloak felt heavy and sodden, and I realized I was shivering uncontrollably. My eyes moved up, past Merlin's wet face and his ruffled short black hair, and took in the surging, swirling mass of malevolent storm clouds overhead.

Then hailstones began to fall, slapping my skin, stinging my eyes. I blinked rapidly. At the edge of my vision, I caught a violent movement and snapped my gaze down to the lake. The tendril curled and whipped out over the rolling waters. Then it vanished. I strained to free myself but was no match for Merlin's strength. The tendril left the Shadow and, no doubt, returned to the artifact, abandoning this new source of elemental power. But why? I had to catch it! Regain my hard fought hold on it. I snarled in frustration.

A bright flash out over the waters of the lake drew my attention. I squinted and focused enough to recognize it was a band of golden light. It skimmed over the thrashing waters towards us. Ghostwheel! Merlin's construct flipped on its side, rose swiftly above our heads, and just as fast dropped over us, wiping away the stormy scene.

I had expected to find us surrounded by the familiar walls of castle Argent, but the sun bathed me in warmth. As Merlin turned slowly, I saw the same lemon colored grass swaying softly in the cool breeze. An angry dark patch gathering on the horizon marred the peaceful landscape, and I knew we were still in the same Shadow, only a short distance from the storm. I rested for a moment in his arms, laid my head on his shoulder, and gave my mind and body a chance to recover. What was happening?

"Can you stand?"

I lifted my head to look up at him, and nodded. He set me on my feet, catching my arm to steady me. Already my thought processes were firing, and when I regained my balance, I shook him off, staggering away, my eyes darting aimlessly over the quiet landscape. My emotions were swinging between fury at Merlin, and desperation to return to the artifact.

I whirled on him; my eyes locked onto his and my words seeped with barely suppressed ferocity. "You've no idea what you've just done, do you? What the hell are you doing here, anyway? Why did you break my

concentration? Damn it! Now I'm going to have to start all over again."

He remained silent and wary – but to my enraged mind, his demeanor seemed disdainful. I became incensed and roared my wrath as I charged forward. I had almost reached him when he held up an imperious hand and calmly spoke the cantrip again. My knees crumpled, and I fell face-first onto the grassy ground.

Merlin sighed. "Twice in one day, Tanda. I'm surprised at you, cousin," he studied my shattered body, "well, maybe not *entirely*."

I managed to pull my arms beneath me to push up onto my hands and knees, and rocked back on my haunches. I gave him what I hoped was a reasonable glare. He watched me, seemingly cold and indifferent, and I felt despondence descend. All of my cousins had refused to aid me in my search for Adam, but Merlin stood before me and my grief found a target in him.

"None of you would help me," I cried. "Why come and interfere with my plans now?" My voice filled with bitterness, my breath came in short gasps as memories crowded and swarmed across my mind. "All I do is help people, and when I need it most no one is there for me. I've had enough of waiting for something to happen. He'll certainly be dead if I do nothing, though I've come to the conclusion that's probably what the others really want...I mean...they never liked him...they were always leaving him behind and I swear he'd be locked up somewhere far away if they got half a chance." My voice rose, and heart raced. "And I try to do this thing and you come here and mess it up! You're all the same! Everyone's self-interest sickens me. I couldn't stand sitting in Argent any longer, so here I am, doing something to help Adam, and you follow me! Why can't you all just leave me alone to –"

A sharp crack resounded and my left cheek seared. I was thrown to one side, falling silent in shock. Merlin frowned as he looked down on me, shaking his hand.

"You're not making sense, Tanda," he said, "and we don't have much time. A Shadow Storm is consuming this world and we need to leave. Come on," He bent down and seized my arm, pulling me roughly to my feet. "I'm taking you back to Argent."

Voicing his intentions merely stoked my rage. "No!" Twisting my

arm, my strength returned, I easily freed myself from his grasp and stalked away – I am stronger than my slender form suggests.

Returning to Argent was pointless! Nothing there could help me find Adam. I had to get back to the artifact, but I did not have a teleport spell prepared, and a glance at the fast-approaching storm told me I did not have time to construct one. *Next time girl, do some brainwork before the legwork.* Besides, the thought of blindly teleporting to a place that might not exist was not a prospect I relished. So I would have to go the long way back, wasting precious time, but unfortunately necessary after my cousin's untimely interruption.

"Tanda?" Merlin's voice disrupted my thoughts.

I scowled at him.

He pointed at the horizon without taking his eyes off mine. "That storm is destroying this Shadow and it was about to take you down with it. I came to get you away –"

"I was in control of that tendril!" I snapped back at him. "You broke my link to it and that's probably what started all this!" I waved my hand towards the amassing violence.

His lips thinned. "The storm was here when I arrived." A shadow flitted across my face and I looked up at wispy clouds – forerunners of the dark mass now close to obscuring the sun entirely, and getting nearer disturbingly fast. He was right, there was little time. Uncertainty crept over me, and my eyes sought his once more.

His voice lost some of its hardness as he continued. "Look, Tanda, for some reason, Ghost couldn't take us back to Argent, so he moved us as far from the storm as he could. If Ghost can't get us out of here, it's unlikely we can leave by our own means, and if this turns out to be true, that storm will eventually destroy us. I don't think you realize the seriousness of our situation."

I bristled at his words. "Oh please, are you sure he's working right?" It was ridiculous to assume we could not leave just because Ghost was unable.

Merlin looked at me askance. Folding his arms, he fixed me with an expression of mild contempt; a steely glint touched his eyes. "Okay, Tanda. Why don't *you* try and get us out of here?"

I clenched my fists. This was getting us nowhere. "Fine! Then you can leave me in peace, so I can get back to my work." I glared at him, and then rubbed my head – it still hurt a lot. I cursed silently. Damn it! The timing of his arrival could not have been worse. Just a few moments more and I would have been able to leave on my own, with the tendril under my control. I chewed my lip. If I could get back to the artifact quickly, I might still regain my hold over it. I pressed my lips together and shook off my weariness, forcing my tense muscles to relax. Practice enabled me to put my mind in the right state for what I wanted, despite my exhaustion. I focused my mind, summoned up the power I had used so often before...nothing happened. I felt no energy, no heightening of my senses – I could not bring the Pattern to mind.

Refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing me fail, I suppressed the momentary panic that gripped my stomach, and turned my back to him and the ever-darkening horizon. I began to walk. I thought of a patch of green to my right, a darker shade of mauve in the sky... I walked several paces, but nothing changed. I tried again, more forceful this time, willing the grass green, there would be a rock to my left. Nothing.

The stuff of Shadow felt pliable, as though it would bend, and I wondered. I pressed my mind against it and tried for a small blue flower, a detail not part of the world where I had left the artifact...the Shadow slipped around me, buttery soft. My vision swam and fogged, and a sliver of pain sliced through my skull. I ignored it, clenched my jaw and pushed harder for the change. The ground bulged, twisted, wrenched away from my psychic hold, then rushed towards me. Instinctively, I threw my hands out to catch my fall.

There was a hand on my shoulder; the grass was prickly on my hands and knees. I looked up as Merlin hunkered down in front of me. I squinted at him, still feeling drained and groggy; I could not decide if he was concerned, or simply curious.

"What happened?" He asked.

"I tried to shift away...but it doesn't feel right..." I managed to stand, staggering a little, but shrugged off Merlin's outstretched hand with a growl of frustration. "I don't have time for this! I have to get back!" I pulled my still-damp cloak around me, as a misty rain began to fall and the

temperature dropped, the light failing and sinking us into a fuzzy twilight. The swish of grass became more insistent. I could not understand what prevented me from summoning the power of the Pattern.

Something brushed against my leg, and I turned. Merlin was on his feet and moving away, cloak billowing. He swayed, halted, stepped forward and swayed again. His face was pale when he turned back to me. For a moment, I wondered if he were trying to teach me some kind of lesson, and my anger flared anew. But before I could vent it, Ghost popped into the air above us and floated down in front of Merlin. They spoke together, and as I listened to their exchange, I knew this was no test.

"All access points to other Shadows are blocked," Ghost's calm detachment was unnerving. "There is, however, a hole ten paces to your right. My sensors cannot penetrate it, so I cannot tell you where it leads. I am going to enter, but will not be able to communicate with you once inside. I will return soon."

Merlin ran a hand through his disheveled hair, and finally nodded. "Ok Ghost, go in, see what you can find. Make sure we can breathe in there, or at least survive for a short time."

I was already measuring the distance to the east and stopped when I reached the hole. It was roughly five feet across, and inside it was a constantly shifting mosaic of black and white swirls that prevented me from gauging how deep it went. Ghost shot past me and into the hole. His golden light disappeared the moment he passed through. I had to look away as my stomach roiled. It was the only way out, and I would go into it, face the unknown, rather than certain death in the storm. The tempest raging above made my choice that much simpler, and as Merlin came to stand with me, I bent my knees.

"Wait!" Merlin grabbed my arm, but I twisted free and jumped.

"Tanda –" His cry was cut off as I fell into the hole.

The wind and rain, lightning and thunder...all sensations vanished as I hung suspended in a checkerboard of insanity. The swirling, randomly

flowing patterns were even more disorientating when I was immersed in them. I looked up, desperate to seize upon something solid. A perfectly round patch of mauve, green and blue hung above my head, shrinking rapidly as I watched. I reached out to grasp it and my perspective changed, and I realized it was not shrinking, but receding into the distance. It seemed as if I was falling, but there was no sensation of movement. Then the circle of color shrank out of existence, leaving me alone with my growing nausea and disorientation.

I searched for something, anything, to focus on. Shapes – black, white, all shades between – rippled and stretched, became spikes, wedges of obsidian wrapping around and through stark barren patches. A teardrop shape of black was close to me. No. When I stared at it, it was very distant. Smears of gray and a slash of white about it were closer now, then mingling with the black to become a five-pointed gray star. Pulsing, constantly merging and breaking apart, the shapes shifted, spiraled about me. I was claustrophobic, then agoraphobic. My heart threatened to shatter my ribs like a hammer to porcelain. My eyes ached trying to follow a charcoal cube, its edges flickering in and out of definition. It merged with a silver pyramid, became a slate colored flower.

Waves of exhaustion battered me. I closed my eyes, but with terrifying clarity felt every fiber of my being ebb and flow with the landscape – it assaulted my body and mind, and left me astray in a sea of misery. My eyes flew open. I flailed my arms, slapped at the shapes so close I could breathe them in, and then they were far, far away, and my arms looked surreal in the nothingness.

Bile rose in my throat, dragged from the pit of my stomach. I drew my legs up, curling into a fetal position, and moaned silently into this cruel void. How long I stayed in such an instinctively safe position, I do not know. But a flash of golden light registered in my tortured mind, and I looked up.

Merlin hung suspended before me. Ignoring his frown of annoyance, I uncurled and flung my arms around him, burying my throbbing head in his shoulder. The chaotic world still had its grip on me and I trembled. I felt him hesitate, then his tension eased, and he held me close.

Several moments passed in silent comfort, then one of his arms let me go, causing me to stir. A second later, the other jerked tight around my waist and forced the air from my lungs. I lifted my head in alarm and caught sight of his face. His eyes were filled with pain and jaw clenched tight. A light purple-colored circle was just above us, and his other hand gripped the edge. The arm around me tugged, urging me upwards. I reached up and took hold of the hole, and pulled myself towards it. The smallest of effort had me moving – my body weightless.

Pushing my head through the hole, I gasped, then choked as icy fingers of air cut into my throat. I lay with the edge pressing into my stomach, looking down at a rocky outcrop three or so feet below me, my breath puffs of fog. Relief washed over me, rejuvenating every cell of my body. I scrambled the rest of the way through and stumbled as I dropped to the ledge, and caught my balance as I staggered dangerously close to a drop off. I looked over. Far below lay a valley, my ledge at the head of it. I swept my eyes along its stony length; mountain ranges formed the walls, their jagged peaks sharply in focus, the loneliness of ages in their imposing heights. Glimmers of minerals winked at me, caught by a sourceless light, and gave the mountains a violet hue. I looked up. There was no sun, only a smooth, cloudless silvery sky.

I heard scuffing noises behind and hurried to help Merlin climb out of the hole, remembering he was injured. He lowered himself down by sliding his back against the rock until he was sitting, a faint moan escaping him. My legs collapsed as I attempted to kneel next to him. I rested my hands on my thighs and took several long and deep breaths to gather myself. I kept my eyes from the swirling hole, shades of it blending seamlessly with the cliff's face.

Merlin watched me with real concern. "Are you okay?" he asked.

I nodded – more of a quick bob of the head, though. I moistened my lips, swallowed and closed my eyes, trying to recover my inner balance. When I opened them, I caught my cousin wincing. His shoulder looked strangely positioned. The sudden and wrenching strain of grabbing the hole must have dislocated it, and I realized then just how fast we had been falling.

I reached out to him and tenderly felt around the joint. He opened his mouth, perhaps to object, but then closed it again without a sound. His

muscles relaxed and he sat still as I took his arm in one hand and pressed the other against his side. I pulled, exerting careful and even pressure until there was an audible pop. His facial muscles twitched, but otherwise he did not respond. I tucked his arm against his side and sat next to him, looking out over the precipice.

Nothing flew between or around the peaks; nothing disturbed the solitude of our position. Far below, large four-legged animals lumbered along the valley towards us; I presumed from the long procession that they were migrating this way and were probably the source of the barely audible but constant rumble. I let my eyes wander back along their path, sighing in pleasure as a light breeze brushed over my face, a mist rain cooling my feverish skin. The crisp air was so clear I could see for miles.

My breath caught. I squinted at a patch of darkness in the distance. Gray filaments twisted together, reaching out of the swathe of cloud to touch the land. Merlin disrupted my view as he shifted until he hunkered down facing me. His eyes were unfocused, and a look of concentration passed over his face, then he met my gaze fully.

He laid a hand on my shoulder and squeezed gently. "What were you doing in that Shadow, Tanda? Tell me what happened."

I did not want to remember the torture of coming so close to a way of finding Adam, only to have it dashed at the vital moment of my victory. My anger had abandoned me, leaving me defenseless against the flood of grief twisting my insides. I sank gratefully into the memory of a soothing dream. I saw again the vibrant colors in the woods – autumn has always been my favorite time of year. I rode with Adam next to me. The trees thinned and the ground rose gently to the crest of a grassy hill. By the time we reached the top, the sun had almost set, and the air had grown cooler. We dismounted and lay together, watching the stars appear, their light growing steadily brighter as the sun offered the world to darkness. His warmth washed away the chill of the night. There are so few moments of true contentment in life, and I cherished that one.

"Tanda." Merlin whispered my name, breaking me out of my reverie. Grief crashed down. The temptation to slip into the yawning chasm of despair widening within me was almost irresistible. "Please," he kept talking, "Tell me what you were doing with the tendril. Where did it come from?

You have to help me figure out how to get out of this trap." Something in his voice made me look at him. His eyes looked startlingly blue against the gray sky, and so like Adam's. Adam...I had failed him again. I pulled my knees up, wrapped my arms around them, feeling giddy from the thin atmosphere, exhaustion coursing through my limbs. My eyes filled with water and I blinked several times, freeing the tears to fall and mix with the raindrops dashed on my face by the blustering wind.

A hand touched my cheek. And for a moment, I saw Adam before me. I reached out, a flicker of hope jolting my heart painfully. Wait, no, Adam's hair was light, not black. I dropped my hand and squeezed my eyes shut against Merlin's confusion and concern.

Fragments of images came to me then, a jumble of memories I had to piece together. "...an artifact...but there's no point anymore...he's gone."

"Who's gone?" There was so much compassion as well as urgency in his voice.

I opened my eyes but did not focus on my surroundings. "Adam." My voice sounded harsh and laced with sadness. "The demon must have killed him... I thought he would be safe where we left him. He'd been stabbed, and lay close to death, but his mother was with him...we had to leave...she is medically trained, so he should have been okay... But when we returned, the demon had his shirt in its claws, and his mother was dead." My throat constricted, and I fought down a wave of sadness. I knew my emotions where written clearly on my face – I was too tired to hide them. "I cannot believe he is dead. We never found the body... I have to find him."

Merlin thought on my words; after a while he spoke carefully. "From what you and the others have said about him, Adam sounds like a pretty resilient guy. It is possible he still lives."

Did he truly believe what he was saying, or was it merely words to comfort me? He had never given up hope of finding his father, and had eventually succeeded. I searched his eyes, but could see only concern. Perhaps... perhaps he spoke honestly.

He urged me to continue, saying softly, "Tell me about the artifact."

I swallowed hard and nodded. As I gathered my thoughts, the excitement I had felt when first finding the artifact returned, a welcome distraction to the misery I felt and the worsening weather. "We had found

an artifact," I began, "in a Shadow where Tyler's mother, Fiona, had dwelled – and I sensed a familiarity about it, like the power of a Spikard. I have some experience with Spikards, as you know, and I was able to activate the thing. From within the pyramid a tendril of energy extended – it shot straight at Tyler and attached itself to his psyche. The only way he could break the link was to walk the Pattern in Argent. I had put all thoughts of it aside, until I returned from Shadow with my cousins, after Adam –" but here my voice broke. Merlin waited patiently as I struggled to gather myself, and I continued a little shakily. "After Adam was attacked. I went straight to my quarters with it, hoping to find a way to use it to locate Adam. As he is Tyler's son, and Fiona had created the artifact, I figured it could be used in this way." My voice grew stronger and more focused as I continued.

Later that night, I stood before a window in my rooms. On the table before it was a crystal bowl, starlight reflecting off the water inside. I had woken moments before; images of Adam's pallid skin and the deep wound in his side still lingered in my mind. My cheeks were wet from tears I had denied until then.

I scooped the water and splashed my face, gasping at the cold. After drying myself, I let the towel fall to the floor, my gaze falling upon Adam's Trump, lying face up next to the bowl. I stared at it, and concentrated, as I had done countless times since the demon had taken him. His features remained frozen. There was no response, no faint stirring of movement – nothing. With a weary sigh, I replaced his card back in my deck, and let my eyes wander aimlessly around the room.

Fiona's artifact stood at an odd angle in the corner by my wardrobe, where I had dumped it, frustrated at my inability to figure out what it could do. Precious hours of studying had revealed nothing; it remained an enigma, the pyramid motionless and unresponsive. I could only assume proximity to the Pattern had stilled it.

Despite my cousins' assurances that Adam was dead, my determination was strong. I would not rest until I found him. And so I

decided right then to take it into Shadow, to a place where the influences of both the Patterns of Amber and Argent would be greatly diminished.

Half an hour later, I was on my horse and riding from the city with the artifact stowed in a backpack. I began shifting as soon as I could, moving towards Amber and away from Argent. After a while, I came to the place of my desire. I dismounted and looked about, unnerved. No animals rusted through the tall yellow grass that stretched in all directions, no birds sang, nothing moved across the ultramarine sky. A sudden chill breeze carried a hint of mint, reminding me of tearooms and leisurely days spent in Amber city with Adam. The rustle of grass broke the silence. Dark misty crags to the north marred the uniformity, rising sheer and high, as though an artist had placed them in the picture as a careless afterthought. With the vermilion sun directly above, they threw no shadow on a desolate land. The silence pressed against me and I had a strong desire to shift away.

Dragging my gaze from the foreboding heights, I looked around, but could see no threat; I hesitated, then strengthened my resolve and shrugged off my rucksack. I lifted out the pyramid, placed it on the ground and sat down cross-legged before it. It would not be easy to compel the artifact to search for Adam, and I knew many hours of study lay before me. Still, I was not deterred. I tuned out all distractions – the hard brittle grass biting into my legs, the general unease – and settled myself into a calm meditative state. I closed my eyes. Slowly, I reached out with my mind, psychically touching the pyramid, as I had done in Fiona's Shadow. The tendril emerged and rose into the air and swayed, danced lazily over my head. I watched its mesmerizing twists and turns, relieved to have finally succeeded in activating it.

I brought my awareness down to the pyramid, wondering how I might go about commanding it to search for Adam's psyche. Without warning, the tendril bolted past me. It skimmed over the grass, arrowing towards the mountains, and before reaching them, it started cutting through Shadow. I strained to follow its rapid progress, but it passed quickly beyond my mental perception.

Opening my eyes, I sprang to my feet and started running – my boots sinking into the soft soil, giving me added purchase. After several paces, I began shifting along its path, crossing worlds where the mountains

were always with me; the only change to each Shadow was in the color of the skies. When the sky turned to mauve, and the mountains had ceased to exist, the tendril stopped.

I found myself standing before an expanse of silvery water where the mountains had been, and with my mystical sight still open I saw the tendril wrap itself about the lake. I sensed elemental power within the waters – it waned, then faded entirely once the tendril had encased it completely.

The familiar unease returned as I stood before the lake, considering my next move. Again I dismissed my discomfort, figuring it to be a by-product of the artifact. Then began a long and hard battle with the tendril, fighting to prize it from the waters and the energy within.

"I had just succeeded when you arrived." My words trailed off, the whistling of the wind had risen in pitch during my tale, now a dull roar. I gazed dazedly down the valley, watching as huge chunks of rock, carved free by a tornado grown to impossible proportions, were sucked into the boiling sky.

After a while, Merlin spoke. "There were erratic power fluctuations in the Shadows bordering Amber's. I came to investigate and saw you by the pool. The storm had begun to disrupt that Shadow, and I tried to see how best to separate you from the tendril." He sighed heavily and I looked at him. "I didn't want to hurt you," he said, "but in the end, there just was not enough time. Either I left, and hoped you managed to finish whatever you were doing and escape, or I stayed, broke the link as I did, and took you with me."

The full realization of his words sank in and I started to tremble. The wind snatched at my cloak and I pulled the slicked heavy material around me. My involuntary moan mixed with the roaring of the wind. "Now you're trapped, here, with me. All along, I'd sensed the storm but ignored my instincts to flee. I wish you had left me there..."

"I could not leave you," he stated flatly. He rose to his feet, held a hand to me. "We can't stay here," he said. "A Shadow Storm is consuming

this world also. I've tried to leave, but this Shadow is sealed off as well." His worried frown caught my attention and I tried to listen to his words, but my exhausted mind refused to respond.

He bent forward, grabbed my arm, dragged me to my feet, and pushed me towards the hole. I baulked, even as the full force of the wind finally reached us and ripped across our ledge. I realized what he was suggesting and shook my head – I could not go back into the void. "No..." I breathed. "I can't –" For a fleeting moment, in my despair, I was tempted to let the storm suck me into its maw, now less than half a mile away – death in the swirling monochrome madness would be slow.

Merlin grabbed me about my waist and threw me over his shoulder. He grabbed the edge of the hole, scrabbled up, and into it, plunging us into the nightmare.

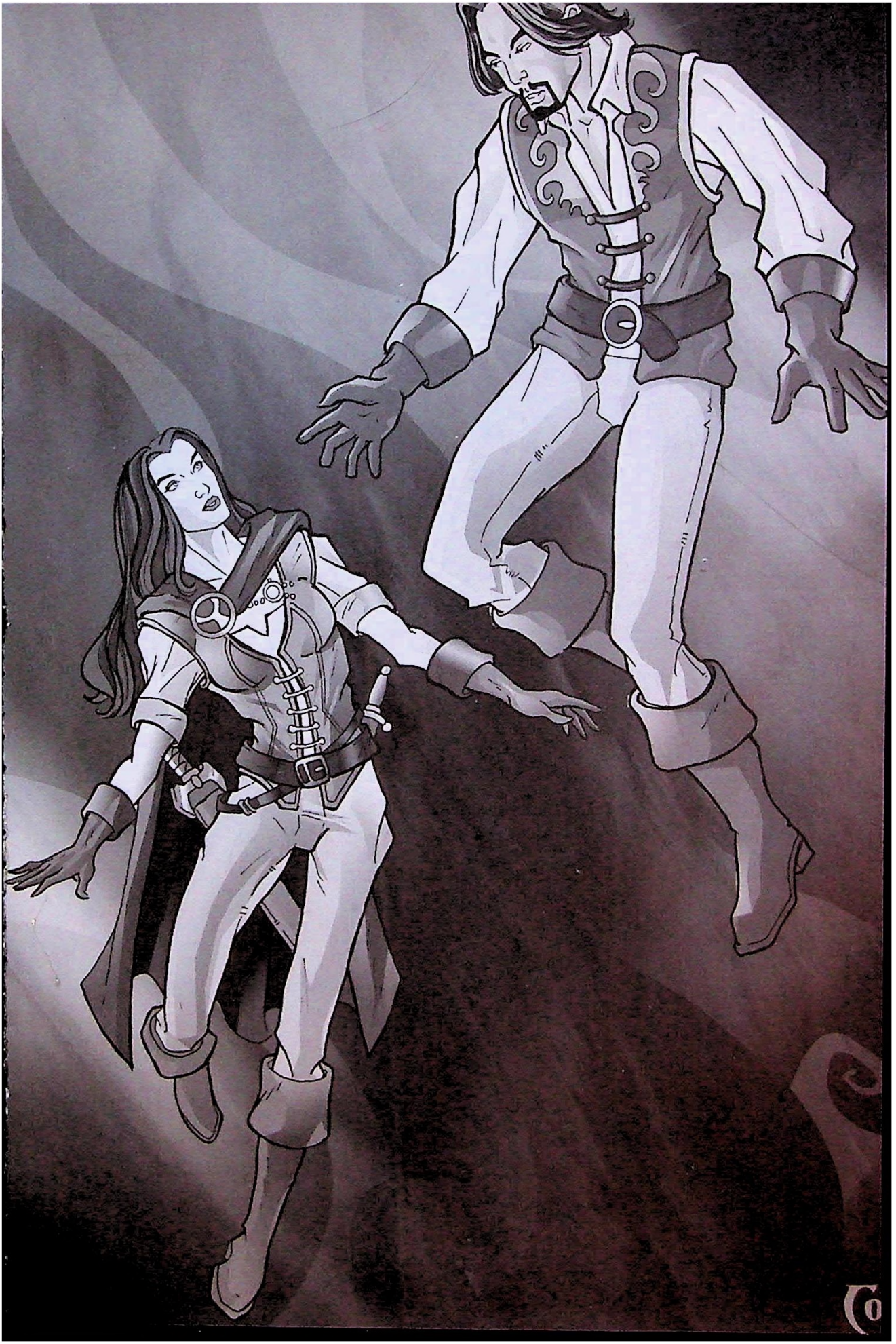
It hit me faster this time, and more intensely. Almost immediately, the effects of the place had me curled up and whimpering. I searched for anything not stretching and twisting, something solid that I could focus on and cling to. I knew, the longer I remained in the void, the worse I would feel, until finally my essence was entirely lost to it.

A hard tug on my cloak tightened it against my neck, and I choked briefly. My legs floated out in front of me. I looked around in confusion. Merlin looked to be unaffected by the physical and mental assault from the void, and my pain-wracked mind stared at him for a long time before it finally processed what he was doing. I looked up in the direction he pointed.

Another circle had appeared, shades of greens and blues interwoven together. At first it was coin-sized, then it grew rapidly until it was almost the same size as the previous exits. Merlin reached out and motioned me to do the same. Desperate to escape, I grabbed at the hole's edge with both hands. The sensation of falling slammed into me as my arms were wrenched painfully, the lip cutting deep into my fingers. I did not let the pain distract me. I propelled my body upwards, and my head passed through.

There was no relief as I emerged this time. The scene before me surged forth and whirled away crazily. I saw pale arms and hands reaching out of a churning greenish blue sea far below, imploring for help. There were heads among them also. Two, six, nine – so many!

The world twisted, distorting my perceptions. I realized it was I –



not them – drowning in the water! Their bodies where flung carelessly across the sky, sapphire clouds overwhelming and smothering them. Was it the howl of the furious wind, or the agonized cries of these damned beings piercing my ears? My instincts demanded I fell back through the hole, but I resisted, morbidly drawn to the horrific destruction playing out before me. Wrenching my eyes away from the sky, I looked to my right. A wave loomed overhead. It started to curl downwards. Clouds, filled with bodies, danced through its crest, the sky and ocean becoming one as the world plunged towards me. I gave in to my terror and fell back through the hole, my soundless scream absorbed in the void.

I clawed at my eyes, until Merlin took hold of my arms and pulled me close. We clung together and watched the colors of the doomed world fade, merging into the void until it was no more.

Hopelessness shrouded me. We were stuck, suspended without momentum or means to propel ourselves. I tilted my head to look at Merlin. He looked worried, and this drove any glimmer of reprieve from my mind. There was no relief for my senses; my physiology would not allow me to survive. Merlin spoke, and I watched his lips move, and knew he asked if I was ok. I shook my head, but instantly regretted even that small movement.

He held me with one arm, whilst reaching into his pocket with the other. He drew out a metal case, and with skilled practice opened it one-handed, shuffled through his Trumps, and stopped at Ghostwheel's – he held it out before him. I closed my eyes. My skin felt stretch, my mind twisted by the erratic environment. I gripped his shirt and pressed my head against his chest, focusing on his rapid heartbeat, grasping at the small comfort.

Hurry, Ghost...please come, and soon.

Gradually I became aware of a bright streak of golden light, then vaguely of being carried, and lifted... the musty smell of dry grass as I was laid upon it. A voice was speaking, words, sentences, all meaningless, but real. I cried out in relief, reveling in the feel of bumpy ground, the sharp

point of a rock jabbing into my left calf. Finally, I opened my eyes. I beheld a sky glowing pink and red, parts pulsing bright then fading. I could not decide if it was sunset or sunrise – for all I knew, it might always be like this. Despite the welcome warmth soaking into my back from the ground, cold shivers rode down my spine. I panted in the dry air and called out.

"Merlin?"

His voice came from my left. "Rest," he said. I turned my head. He sat next to me on the ground. "It's not over," he caught my gaze and held it. "This has to be stopped."

I nodded. A bird sang, and I pushed up on my elbows and tried to find it. We were on the crest of a hill, the grass like tiny green feathers; here and there a bluish gray stone pushed up through them – I shifted my leg away from the one digging into me. My eyes searched the leafless trees surrounding our hill and alighted on one of the spindly branches. A small coffee-colored bird flicked its wings as it repeated an offbeat melody, brown feathers standing out against silver bark.

Recollection of the artifact returned, thoughts of which I had lost and forgotten while in the void. So many questions shouldered to the fore. What was its purpose? What had happened when Merlin had freed its tendril? How might it be sealing worlds and how many others would it consume?

We had become rats in a maze with no idea of the point of the experiment. Was it the artifact's purpose to trap and contain sources of power, such as Shadow Storms? Why would Fiona want this ability? It was so destructive I could not see a use for it. I glanced at the hole punched into this Shadow just above the ground several paces back; with trees on either side and behind, it looked like a picture frame suspended from their spiky branches. Had I unwittingly triggered the sealing of Shadows by activating the artifact so near to a Shadow storm? I looked away quickly, feeling sickened by the evidence of my thoughtless actions.

I looked about; the trees varied in size and shape, some squat and gnarled, others tall with thin straight boughs – all of them bare. Further down the slope, the forest leveled out and covered a wide plateau. On the horizon, over the distant tree crowns, was a smear of darker red – I figured

it to be a manifestation of the Shadow storm. When the wind blew from that direction, I caught the spicy scent of wood smoke.

After a while, I said, "You were right you know."

Merlin stopped thumbing through his Trumps to glance at me, and raised his eyebrows. "How so?"

"You said we'd have fun together soon."

"You call this fun?"

"You're not having a good time?"

He stared at me for a long time. Then a slow smile stole across his face, and the sound of his quiet laughter was soothing music. He shook his head, still smiling as he resumed flicking through his Trumps, pausing at one or two. The grass tickled my fingers as I ran them over it. I still felt dissociated – it was taking far longer to recover. I did not think I could keep going into that place and remain whole.

I rested, and contemplated. I stared at the expanding redness in the distance, lightly chewing my lip, gathering my wits enough to enable my mind to process what we had been through, I tried to make sense of our predicament.

I whispered up to Merlin. "In some of the Shadows, the destruction seems more extensive, and that last one was almost entirely consumed when I looked into it." I swallowed against a wave of nausea. It was best not to focus on details. I hurried on. "All of the ones we've entered so far have been sealed off. I wonder..." It just might be possible. I looked at Merlin and met his expectant gaze. A tingle of excitement flashed through me.

"Maybe we can find one the artifact hasn't yet broken from the rest of Shadow – if that's what's happening. We jump into it, and start shifting immediately, or Trump somewhere... unless the holes are formed once the world has been sealed off." My enthusiasm faltered. I pulled a face at the thought of spending the rest of what looked to be a short life jumping in and out of Shadows. Besides, I did not think my recovery rate from the void would be quick enough to allow me to use any power to escape – I would have to rely on Merlin for that. There was still a chance Ghost might come up with something. "We can hope that Ghost finds an end, or beginning of that place." I bobbed my head back at the hole, but kept my eyes away from it.

"He's not having much luck so far," Merlin said. "And I would need more time to study the physics of the place to know if there is a way out. Considering the time we have..." he looked at the smear of red, rolling steadily closer, delivering a fiery death to the land, "I suggest investigating your first summation of our situation. Once we're back inside," he glanced behind us, "I'll contact Ghost again and instruct him to search for Shadows not sealed off. Timing's going to be critical, and we may be in there for a long time." He studied me carefully and I saw quiet concern in his eyes.

I managed a weak smile. I drew in a deep breath, and got to my feet, slowly. "Let's go before that fire gets here." I turned to stand before the hole, as ready as I could ever be. I wanted to escape this trap, not die within it. My actions had inadvertently caused a terrible chain reaction, and I had to stop it. Merlin rose and joined me, and together we plunged into the hole. I barely endured the blessedly short time in the void before he grabbed at another, this time purple and brown. We fell into it.

I was shocked back to awareness as bitter cold sheared through my body.

Instinct for survival overrode the natural reaction to gasp for air, as icy waters closed over my head. Like a block of lead, I sank. The water was fresh, not salty. But more than anything else I had experienced that day, I was prepared for the paralysis brought on by the near-freezing waters. Osric had thrown me into the realm of Ice at the Font of the Four Worlds and left me for dead, only I had survived, and learned to control the elemental power – he had done me a favor.

I drew upon that hard-earned knowledge, and reached out my mind, searching for elemental power within the waters. The faintest tinge...there...yes! There was some – disparate, but pliable if one knew how. I drew the power to me, weaved it into a cushion of water below, strong enough to support some of my weight, and used it to lift me to the surface. As my head rose above the waters, I gulped the bitingly cold air.

Water, water, everywhere. Chocolate-brown clouds and insipid purple seas. Lightning backlighting the heavy clouds in the distance. With my head above the undulating waves, I used my arms to turn.

"Merlin!"

It was pointless to call out, but I did it, again. The sound of my own

voice, the lap of water on my shoulders, welcome relief to my sound-starved senses.

"*Merlin!*"

I saw a shadow moving closer from below, powering up towards me. Merlin broke the surface and gasped for breath, blinking water from his eyes. When I extended the cushion beneath his feet, he looked at me curiously, but did not question it. He looked tired, his skin ashen. I could not imagine what I looked like. My body still threatened to demonstrate just how shattered it had been by yet another trip in the void, no matter how short.

"We're still trapped," Merlin's teeth chattered and his breath came in short gasps as he spoke.

I looked up, Merlin following my gaze, and a sense of despair threatened to creep back over me. About twelve feet above our heads was the hole we had fallen through, a silvery crack in the muddy-brown sky. There was no way to reach it. I glanced to the right as lightning flashes came faster, the peel of thunder closer, louder. We did not have much time, and while I dreaded more time in the void, we had no option but to hurtle from Shadow to Shadow until we – or Ghost – managed to find a world from which we could escape, if one existed. I pushed away the nagging doubts, and turned my attention once more to the waters.

"Tanda?"

"Just give me a minute," My concentration was almost entirely on the elemental energy surrounding us. There was so little of it, but there was a lot of sea to draw upon, and if I could gather enough of the element into our area, I could work with it.

Searching, reaching further, I probed deep into the ocean. I drew forth all the power I could find, from coral, seaweed, fish, urchins, and strengthened the cushion below until we were standing on a firm surface, unaffected by the swell. The temperature dropped. It began to snow, huge flakes flew in every direction, and light dimmed on the churning sea. Time. I needed more than we had. Wider, I spread my mind further, hunting for more power. There! I pulled it to me, but it resisted and tried to carry me away; I stood firm, legs apart and wrenched it to me.

I was more tired than I thought. My concentration slipped, and for

a moment, I was submerged beneath a cold dark wave. Instinctively I kicked to the surface, and when my head cleared the water, I forced the cushion to rise. A hand tightly griped my arm. I relied on Merlin to stay close as I resumed work on the element. From the cushion, I wove strands of elemental energy into a cube large enough to support both of us. I strengthened it, made it solid and scrambled up and crouched low on the top, Merlin doing the same as he crawled up beside me.

The wind screamed across the sea, forcing me to keep us low in the water. I turned my back; frozen misty drops on my face cracked as I brushed them away with my hand. Had I not had a good grounding in the control of the element, I do not think I could have maintained my concentration.

I shaped another block. It rose easily from the cushion until it broke the surface, but lifting it from the water was a grueling challenge. I squeezed my eyes shut and clenched my teeth together as I strained to heave it up onto the first block and across it to a little over half way, forming a step. My faint groan of exertion was torn away by the howling tempest around us. Hurriedly, I grabbed more strands of energy from within the cushion, and hauled them together into another block, the last I could hope to sustain, with the force of nature trying to shatter my concentration.

The mental effort to move the third block up onto the second was exponentially harder. I was exhausted from my efforts so far, and lifting it further away from the water that had spawned it. My nails dug into the slightly spongy surface I rested on, as I strove to elevate the final step. Finally, I dragged it into place. The cushion sagged, as though I had overloaded a car's suspension. Even as I tightened my hold on the stair, I knew it could not last. Lightning seared across the sky, mirrored in my head as pain lanced through my skull and down my back; the strain of maintaining the structure was becoming too great. I managed to lift my head, open my eyes. My hands clawed at the second shimmering step and I dragged myself fully onto it, and lay flat.

My world had shrunk to the blocks, the cushion, and the hole. I could do no more than lay there, holding it all together. I sensed, more than saw, the fragments of sky and sea roll together, rip apart, drip like liquid nitrogen to either side of the steps.

A mist obscured my vision. Some tiny part of me acknowledged

Merlin gripping my arm, pulling me up onto the third step. The cushion was ripped away, swept into the vortex closing in on all sides, and my whole body shook with the effort to hold the rest of the stair together. Hands forced me into a crouched position. Our exit was still a few tantalizingly feet out of reach.

"Jump!"

Had I screamed it, or had he? Perhaps we both did. The steps fell away, as my boots pushed up off their watery surface. I grabbed for the edge of the hole and cried out as I managed only the barest of grips. Merlin hung beside me, eyes so wide I could see the whites. He swung up and sat sideways in the hole, then reached down and took hold of my arm, pulling me to him. I crashed into his chest, hurling us both into the void, with Merlin holding me to him, and my hands gripping his shirt. And so we escaped one madness, for another.

Order in the chaos, I could see it clearly. Geometrically perfect shapes flowing and forming around me, in and through me. It would have been a joyous release to flow into the clearly defined shapes between them, to become one with the soundless equation. Exhaustion tortured my mind and I yearned to seep into their comforting and eternal embrace.

A warmth enveloped me, foreign and strange with a shape unlike those around me. I tried to be a sphere, letting my form melt around its uneven surfaces. But I could not match it, and it did not flow like the others. I saw it from the inside out, and it swam within itself, maintaining its cohesion, and yet existing with the world outside of it. I could not understand. I turned my attention back to the forms that lured me with the promise of symbiosis, and my mind drifted away from the warmth.

Smooth, as syrup from a spoon held high, I flowed, dripped and oozed into the space between a skeletal fragment and an irregular tar-like form. The shapes were hesitant... almost curious. I started to let my mind drift into them, wanting to meld with their essence.

Suddenly, a sharp and agonizing surge of color assaulted me. New

shapes surrounded me, hard and unyielding. I screamed in anguish as they rejected me. Then a crack of pain across my knees wrenched my awareness, and I felt my feet dragging across a hard surface, dust rising and tickling my nose. Something aided me in this unlikely movement. I stumbled, and then found my feet, my limbs remembering what to do before my mind had even processed what was happening.

I was running with Merlin beside me. He had a firm grip on my arm, dragging me relentlessly forward. I ached and throbbed all over, as though I had fought for days in battle. Heat suffused my body as my heart pumped, and I was acutely aware of blood surging, ebbing and flowing through my limbs. My coordination returned and I ran faster along a hard-packed road. We sped past trees, at first short, then stretching tall and straight into a fluffy gray sky. The road became a muddy track. More than anything right then, I wanted to fall into its inviting softness and gain relieve from the constant exertion. Large four-legged animals brayed and cantered away from fences lining our path. Then the fences were houses and we ran over a cobbled street, our boots clicking on the uneven surface.

We slowed, Merlin's hand tightening on my arm, pulling me to a stop. His face was creased with worry as he took hold of my shoulders to study me closely. The beads of sweat running down the side of his brow fascinated me as they caught the light from a lantern hanging just to his right. A voice came from inside the house behind him – a child calling out to its mother. My eyes wandered to the door, the woodwork covered in cracked, flaking paint a pale shade of its original color, like a burnt grass in a garden at the height of summer. Looking down, I saw my black boots coated with mud that crumbled onto the small squares of the cobbled street. I looked to my right, then to my left. Houses lined the winding street, their windows and walls sagging with weariness. All vivid hard edges.

I looked again at Merlin, at the stubble on his chin and his disheveled black hair. His dark rimmed eyes still alight with an energy I could feel. The low toll of a bell in the distance caressed my ears, then the echoing call of the town crier telling us it was two in the morning, and all was well. I let my gaze travel over the soft features of the man before me. I reached out and touched his cheek lightly, felling the scratch of the rough stubble on my fingertips. In the void, I had seen him from the inside, and watched him

shapeshift, from their perspective. I dropped my hand and closed my eyes, taking a deep breath of the acrid air.

When I opened them, Merlin still stood holding me, waiting. And gradually, the world around me became the version of reality I knew, and the other shifting world just a memory. I started to smile, then faltered. I knew with jarring certainty that I had almost lost my self to the void.

"That was closer than I'd like," he said. "You would not have survived another trip in that place. It was fortunate we came upon an exit when we did... I wasn't expecting to reach a Shadow where we could shift away so soon, though."

"We're free?"

He nodded slowly. "Now you have to show me where the artifact is."

I blinked. "Okay." His hands fell from my shoulders as I straightened. More than just my survival was at stake. The destruction had to be stopped and this purpose gave me some small strength.

We walked, slowly, and I made small changes to our environment, then as my confidence in my abilities rose, I tried for larger and faster alterations. I was exhausted, and we had to stop frequently to rest, and the further we traveled, the more I had to lean on Merlin's arm for support. I do not know how I managed it, but I got us to the Shadow with the artifact.

It was as before, just the swish of grass where we walked, and the quiet rustling of our clothes. No animals moved. No birds called from the trees. There was no wind and no clouds obscuring the pale blue sky. The sun touched the peaks of the unsettling mountains, long shadowed fingers reached out to us. My attention snapped forward when Merlin stopped short; I heard his sharp intake of breath and felt his arm tense.

We had rushed to this point and there had been no need, but not for the reasons I could ever have imagined.

He stood with the pyramid at his feet. A dark figure, arms crossed over his chest, silver gauntlets reflecting the red sunlight, and hard lines of anger on his face. As we approached, beads of sweat and water from my bedraggled hair ran into my eyes, and I blinked several times to clear my vision. It improved somewhat, but my experience in the void had left my senses distorted – only time would heal them fully. We stopped before him

and I shivered at the depth of wrath in his eyes as I looked up to meet his gaze.

"So it was you," he said carefully, taking us both in with the statement. "You have done much damage to my realm," he said. "And I do not think even I have the power to repair it."

His focus snapped to his son as Merlin started to respond. But I had set these events in motion, it was my responsibility, only I was accountable. I squeezed his arm and straightened with great effort, then stepped forward. Merlin started to protest, but I moved my hand to his chest, and shook my head slightly, whispered a simple, "No." I let my hand linger, feeling the warmth of his body through his sodden shirt, savoring the dampness beneath my bruised fingers and the faint trace of his rapid heartbeat. Finally, I had to let my arm drop to my side as I turned to face his father's anger.

I did not have the energy to say anything other than, "I'm sorry, Corwin." My voice cracked, sounding rough and harsh. I swallowed, my throat so raw I winced, and continued more softly. "My actions led to this. Merlin came to my aid and the artifact dragged him inadvertently into its influence. I had not expected such extreme destruction..." My eyes drifted down to the artifact. I must have stared for a long time, because I heard Corwin exhale a long breath. I looked up, but he seemed more saddened than angry. I licked my lips and winced as my dry tongue did little to relieve the cracked, dehydrated skin.

"Tanda, I must continue what I was about, but I will have this story when I return to Argent. You are both exhausted and in need of rest." He unfolded his arms and bent down, picked up the artifact and stood. "Take her back to Argent, make sure she sleeps." He said this to Merlin and I did not argue. I could barely stand and I wanted to go home, to see my son. Corwin briefly gripped his son's shoulder and whispered a few words to him I did not catch and was too exhausted to try. He left us then, taking the artifact with him. I did not resist when Merlin took my arm to Trump us both to Argent.

I woke from a deep dreamless sleep and it was dark – I could not tell how long ago Merlin had carried me to my rooms. The castle had been bustling with people when we Trumped in, and a muted light had filled the hallways, it might have been dawn or dusk. After my insistence, he agreed I could see my son, but only briefly. Aodhan was asleep, and I had not wanted to disturb him so I watched him for a long time, and then reluctantly tucked his blanket about him. As I straightened, Merlin took my arm and gently, but firmly, steered me towards my bedroom. He left me with Freda, my lady in waiting, and she had managed to undress me, because I was clothed in a long warm nightgown.

I sat up, pushed the heavy quilt aside and swung my legs out of bed, ignoring my protesting limbs as I stood. I padded silently out of my bedroom and across the living area, kneading my sleep-swollen eyes to clear them as best I could, and keeping to the thick rugs covering the icy stone floor. The door to my son's nursery was open. I crept in and over to his cot. Taking a moment to watch his tiny round face, his little mouth slightly open, the feeling of emptiness I had endured during the past days receded. And the longer I stayed leaning over him, the more I realized just how much I still stood to lose in life.

Beside his pillow was the toy Merlin had made. Shaped as a cube, each side a different color and divided into nine squares, the blue side facing up. I avoided touching it as I carefully took Aodhan in my arms, lifting him with his blanket wrapped about him for warmth – it was purple, not gray as when I had tucked him in. I must have slept for more than a day. I eased into the cushioned armchair by the smoldering remains of the fire, deciding I preferred the subtle glow to dancing flames as accompaniment to the story I wanted to tell my son. He stirred in my arms as I began to speak of my adventure with Merlin, and through most of the telling, his unblinking, green-eyed gaze was on me.

As I neared the end, however, he had fallen asleep, and I stared at the charred logs lying crossed on the grate, yellow and red caves formed between and beneath them. The experience in the void had scared me, but

the first chance I get, I will journey back to the Shadow of endless yellow grass. There may still be a hole there – I will see if I can find it, to explore and learn more of its nature. I was fascinated, and frightened, by the prospect of journeying to that place again one day. In a way, it was my duty to study it, and perhaps even understand it. The artifact had been stopped before it had destroyed even more Shadows, but what of the void world and the ever-changing shapes living within. Did they still exist? If I had somehow created them, albeit in ignorance, by activating the artifact in such an unstable region of Shadow, could that justify my careless actions that had endangered not only myself and countless Shadows, but Merlin too?

Thoughts of Adam came to me, yet they lacked the angry potency from before. "I will never give up hope," my whisper was for those warm glowing places. "...I will find you...but my recklessness has gone, put to rest as it should. I cannot throw my life away." One of the logs shifted, sliding off the others, and I started. Aodhan breathed a sigh, disturbed by my sudden movement, his hand clenched and unclenched as I watched him sink back into his dream. "You would not want me to..."

Karen Brazil:

Karen Brazil was born in Dublin, Ireland, and moved to Brussels with her parents when she and her brother were teenagers. In the early 1990's, while finishing her schooling in England, she discovered RPGs and her love of gaming grew while she attended Bath University. After spending her final year incorporating IT into her degree, she gained a BSc in Biology and started her career as a systems programmer. She now works for a major airline as a systems analyst. Karen lives with Mike, her partner and long suffering proof-reader, and they spend as much time as possible walking and hiking together. She also enjoys reading, drawing and writing (especially Tanda's Amber diaries!).

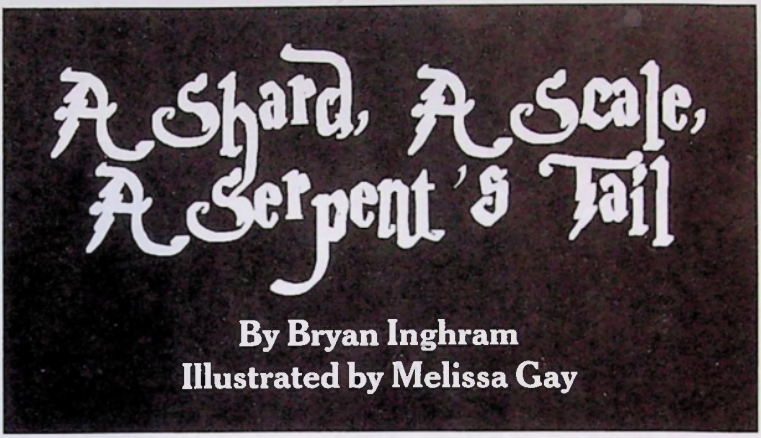
Cody Collins:

Cody Collins dwells in Berkley, Michigan with his (very patient) wife, Jen, and his two little art directors (also known as Amber & Riley). Having sold his soul to several competing pagan art deities, he slaves day and night producing various forms of art for the Movie, Animation, and Video Game industries as a conceptual artist. Once a week, when unchained from his art table and allowed his two hours of fresh air and freedom, he seeks out freelance RPG, book and illustration projects. When asked about his philosophy on life, the artist's only response was "Eat when hungry, sleep when sleepy, and watch out for those sneaky evil little bunnies...". It's assumed only his therapist knows what he's talking about. (www.codycollins.com)

ABYSS: FROM WITHIN

by Genevieve Cogman

Is it a wonder that a man should pause
Upon the edge of darkness, and delight
To see the frailty of ordered light,
Beyond all limits and all natural laws?
This is creation's end: within this night
Freedom is ours, we are no more confined
By any other cause than our own mind:
We see in certainty by our own light.
You need no journey farther than your mind
To find this edge: within your mirrored eyes
The boundary of light and order lies,
Darkness the easiest of things to find.
So look within: an easy thing to do.
Why be concerned that it looks into you?



Looking down the biggest, deepest hole of all creation brings one thought to my mind. This is a BIG mistake. I stretch my arms and try to gather my wits about me. I am in my lupine form now; my dark-haired arms flex and ripple with my exercise. My clawed feet dig at the sparse soil and my nose twitches. It seems the time is here, the master of the dive gives me the sign to begin.

Too late to quit now, no going back with everyone looking at me, waiting for me to crack or breakdown. I step back, check the Logrus tendril tied round my ankle, and there are no more excuses. With a prayer to the Serpent and a moment of silence, I begin my run across the blasted stone of the rim.

It takes me five loping strides to reach the edge, and I push off like my life depends on it. (Which it does.) My footing is good and there is a brief instant of suspension at the top of my arc. In this moment, I revert to the training that's been so drilled into me.

Time distorts, I focus my thoughts and without effort the words drop from my lips.

Remember me, my love,
When thou look into the depths
Those depths are coming at me faster and faster. I extend my arms

and legs to catch the air. The acceleration of the fall twitters and dances in my stomach. The wind whips my black fur and I close my eyes.

Mourn for me not

In truth, my fate is set

All alone for the first dive, I wonder if it will be my only one. The legends say you can only dive so many times, that eventually the Serpent gets tired of you. How many runs do I have in me? I can feel my falling speed stabilize. I have hit terminal velocity, an unfortunate name that...

For I fall into the endless abyss

To pay my masters' debts

I open my eyes again, and there is not much to see. The wall has fallen away, leaving me alone in my dive. I feel like a spider, ballooning in the wind. I can see other tendrils off in the distance, the lifelines of my comrades, doing their business.

Alone in the silent deep,

It cannot break my heart

Silence is the nature of the dive, except your own words and the wind blowing past your ears. I slip through an opaque purple cloud, making me brace for an impact that never happens. I grab at the air and stare into the big black nothingness.

My ties to thee, my love

Keep me from its dark

Whipping in the wind, I can feel my Logrus tendril play out above me. It's wrapped around my leg in a knot that ironically resembles a noose. If I can live through this I will earn a matching brand, a blackened noose of barbed wire, the mark of the Pit-diver.

I keep thy memory beside me

As if a burnished shield

I can remember Lord Barith. He somehow convinced me that I would make a good Pit-diver. In the whistling air, I can hear his words, "Come on Durance, you would be perfect for it. You aren't *afraid* are you?" Maybe I should have asked him if he had ever dived before...

Protecting me from that shadowy gloom
Where treasures might be revealed

It's an old tradition that on your first dive, if you are fortunate enough to find an artifact, it's yours to keep. It's also kind of a sick joke. The truth is, if you are lucky you get to keep the greatest treasure of all, your own life.

And if ever the Abyss should take me
And the Serpent's mercy forsake me

I think about the Church of the Serpent, hung upon the tree of matter. In a simple shrine, there is a carving of a hanging man, a symbol of searching and sacrifice. Here my fellow divers leave offerings to the Serpent, in hope that she will ignore their presence. I didn't forget my offering, as it couldn't hurt to court favor from the powers that be...

Then throw your roses in those depths
Else the darkness comes to take thee

The poem is over and now I must break my fall or impact into the Abyss. My mind orders the tendril to contract. I am somewhat new at this, and it contracts with a clumsy jerking motion. I dance about like a puppet wielded by an epileptic puppeteer. The motions nearly make me sick but they do slow me down. All is well that ends well, I suppose. I stop sinking and hang there, getting my bearings, some distance above the concealed surface of the Abyss.

Upside down, I light the sunstone at my furry wrist and take a look around. I can see that the Pit's wall has returned to give me company. I slowly descend face first, judging my speed by the craggy stone wall off in the distance. Soon enough, the Abyss becomes clearer to my sight.

It's probably easier to describe the Abyss by describing what it isn't. It isn't just liquid, it's not simply black, and it's certainly not friendly. Looking at it, your eyes kind of slip off, like it's not supposed to be viewed with mortal eyes. A slow flow can be noted, by the brave that stare in its direction long enough. Still, you can tell its level because of the layer of mist that covers it.

I get as close as I dare, and I can begin to smell the mist. It smells just like they warned me, like bad dreams, hot acid, and burnt flesh. No

good for me to choke now, so I let my shape-shifting do some work and soon the smell fades mostly from my notice.

Slowly I swing across the surface, looking for easy pickings on top, or indications of hidden booty lying beneath. Nothing reveals itself to my searching. I wonder how long I can hold out, I wonder if this is even worth the effort.

As I search, I entertain myself by thinking about the retrieved items I have seen in the Great Market. Often beautiful, sometimes bizarre, they always seem to bear a unique quality. The artifacts fetched from the Abyss carry a rare mystique, making them more valuable than items created by the skills of Chaos Lords or fetched from the depths of Shadow.

"Kiyyyeeeeee!!! Mi*iiine!!!!*"

Surprising me as I daydream, I jolt and turn to see a winged demon, flying perhaps only a hundred yards away. It's obviously screaming at me, as there is nobody else near. I can barely understand its speech but I can guess that it regards this "spot" as its personal scrounging ground.

You see, demons too, hunt in the Abyss. Sometimes they hunt for food, and then sometimes they hunt for artifacts like we do. They usually don't threaten us, or so I was told.

They also say exposure to the Abyss can make a Pit-diver go mad. I don't know about that, but it certainly has a corrupting effect on demons that act as retrievers. They sit in their market stalls, shaking, blistered and twisted, just like the one flying crazily toward me.

Reflexively I twist away, just to keep my position stable. I hold out my hand and scream a warning at the beast, "Keep away from me! Else Chanicut will burn your bones!" I hope that invoking the name of my noble House will intimidate the beast, but it continues to fly closer. The beast doesn't seem to be impressed with my threats.

I rotate with it, as it circles slowly around me. I make ready for what looks to be the inevitable. I don't intend to run away. The others divers would laugh about how I fled from my own shadow and I would never hear the end of it.

Hanging there, I notice something small glinting below me, concealed by the gray mist. Ominously, a huge swelling rises there also, as if something huge swims close to the surface and then dives down into the Abyssal depths.

I hesitate only until the swelling fades. Then, as the demon flies at me, I dive for whatever the glint might be. I brace for the touch of the Abyss and reach out for any prize I might find...

The Demon, aiming too high, overshoots me and hits my Logrus tendril. At the last second I am jerked up violently and I grasp at empty, greasy mist.

I grunt and bellow at the impact as I spin wildly.

I scream at the top of my lungs at the demon, enraged at how close I came to success. Looking up, I can see that the demon is caught on my Logrus thread. I tense the tendril and we collide into each other violently.

"Miiiiiine!!! Miiiiiiiine!!!!" It keeps screeching in my ear.

Tangled together like this, we are forced to grapple. I try to claw its eyes out as we struggle, while it pounds at my chest with its armored fists. My strength seems greater that his and I knock its arms away as it tries to defend itself. Unfortunately its body is covered with bonelike plates and my claws scratch away uselessly.

So I fight to untangle us as we hang there. Taking advantage of my distraction, the demon squirms out of my grasp and flies out of reach. It hisses angrily at me and flutters a short distance away.

I glance back down at the Abyss, to see if that teasing treasure is still there. I can just make out the glimmer, resting on the still surface. Again I dive at it, desperate to grab my prize, so I can retreat back to the rim and safety.

My right hand penetrates into the Abyss and I gasp at the contact. Almost all sensation in my arm is numbed and it feels like the Abyss is trying to pull my soul out through my hand. I feel a slight, distant contact, somewhere in my hand and I grab hold.

As I pull my arm out, my face is struck by a spiked demonic claw. Hissing and spiting, the demon struggles with me again, trying to tear my fist open. We are both splashed by the Abyssal liquid as we roll and fight, a hair's breadth from annihilation.

We bitterly struggle, with nothing but grunts and hissing to fill the empty void. I squeeze my hand as tight as possible, around my prize. I would prefer to die with it, than give it up. I can feel something sharp stab into my palm, but my fist is numb and I am too busy fighting to be bothered.

He buffets me with his wings as I claw at his belly with my feet. With a cheap and vicious punch, he manages to knock the wind out of me. Convulsing, I bring my arms down, and rake his head with both my hands. Whatever thing lies in my right fist, it tears a terrible gash across the demon's face. Great gouts of blood spray out from the wound, covering me in red.

With a shriek, it convulses, releases me, and falls into the abyss.

All is silent again, aside from my own panting and wheezing. I can feel the blood in my hand and on my body. I feel sick and faint. With what is left of my strength, I send the signal up the tendril to retract.

I can vaguely remember the ride up. It seemed to take far too long compared to the brief fall down. When they pulled me over the rim, I can only assume the healers rushed to help me.

Cold water splashed across my face, bringing be back from my sweet dream of the Abyss.

Awakening with a shock, I found my brother Pit-divers gawking at me as I lay on a blanket. Somebody behind me spoke quietly, saying that I was terribly lucky. It might have been true, but at that time I felt anything but lucky.

I hurt all over. My head was beaten and my chest felt scratched to hell. I wondered if I had picked up a broken rib or two, but the worst pain seemed to come from my right hand. I raised it to see what was wrong. I slowly opened it to find a seven-inch shard of metal clutched there. It was covered in my blood but it shimmered like a snake scale or like the sheen of oil. My hand was cut to shreds by it, and the healer took the shard out and began to clean my wounds.

My trainer gently kicked my shoulder and laughed. "Rest well, Durance. You have really earned your brand. You are a Pit-diver now, so I guess we owe you a drink at the edge."

I nodded to him and stared at my prize, wondering what mysteries it might contain.

The dream was a familiar one, unfortunately.

It is dark outside and I am running, struggling desperately to get away. There is a storm rising behind me, with thunder at my back and a cold wind that blows my hair wild. My feet seem slow and disobedient; they just won't go as fast as my brain screams to go. In the road ahead, I can see my shadow flicker, framed on the ground by purple flashes of lightning. My shouts echo uselessly and I trip and collapse into the hard soil in front of me. I roll over to look at whatever pursues me, and a flash of purple blinds me.

I awoke with a yell, gripping my sheets, and turned to look for that enemy that never quite seems to materialize. Covered in cold sweat, I cursed and shivered. It took me a minute to slow my breathing and heart rate down. I lay there quietly, just making sure that my bed wasn't going to crawl away from me.

Sighing, I sat up, threw my feet off my bed, and contemplated my empty room. From behind me, a faint light filtered down from the small holes set high in the wall and through the green haze floating in the air. The effect made my room look sickly, and drew an eerie green silhouette of me on the floor. I waved a weary hand at my phantom twin and stood.

"No rest for us tonight, brother."

I needed that rest badly too.

In just twenty turnings I was going to try to essay the Logrus and take my due as a "lord" of Chaos. Rest, relaxation and meditation were supposed to be my call of duty. That's irony for you. The High Priest of the Serpent had told me I needed a clean, empty mind for essaying the Logrus, and even then the process was risky. Then my childhood sleepy-time buddy returned to haunt me, just when I needed all the rest and peace I could muster.

Well, that wasn't going to happen, that's for sure. Sitting in the green shadows I considered what I should do. Try to go back to sleep? Meditate? Maybe go to the Church of the Serpent and make a sacrifice? Certain contrariness filled me and I decided to go to the Great Market instead. Maybe someone would try to rob me and I could share some of my misery.

I dressed slowly in my gray and red sashes and began my shape-

shifting. If I was going out alone, I had better look the part. I could feel the bones and muscles in my legs lengthen and the hairs on my back grow longer. My vision contorted briefly, as my eyes slid around to fit my new wolf-like face. Teeth grew into wicked fangs and boney plates blistered up on my arms and chest. My fingernails thickened into claws. Lastly my posture lurched forward and my balance shifted to accommodate the final changes.

Standing in the dark, I gestured, speaking a word of command, and a luminary stone flared into white light. I gave myself a good look over in the mirror.

I noted that my eyes were far more bloodshot than usual. I resembled nothing less than a dire-werewolf with a bad case of bloody socket.

"Bah!" I growled. Somehow I looked even worse than I felt. I made a rude gesture at the mirror and adjusted my loose sashes to fit better. At least while I looked like this, I wouldn't get much trouble from the usual suspects. I tied my lucky shard around my neck and grabbed a few marks of debt. Maybe I would see something worth wasting my money on.

Lurching out of my room, I loped down the long empty hall. No one seemed out, a good thing since I didn't feel like talking to anyone anyway. I found the ways portal to the main hall, a marble arch filled with shimmering liquid, like a wall of mercury. I slid through easily and made my way toward the front gates, leading from House Chanicut onto the Grand Avenue of Chaos.

Luckily for me, Kelvat and Corvis were on duty at the gate.

Kelvat laughed as he saw me approach. Holding two wicked poleaxes upright with his scaly arms, he spared me a sly grin. Corvis looked at me also, and then resumed picking at his teeth with what looks suspiciously like a human rib bone.

Kelvat hissed loudly at me, "Durance, you look ssick! Are you ssure you should be leaving the waysss? You lookss like you have burning eyssss."

With a smirk, I growled a reply back at him "Open that gate Kelvat... Don't make me turn you into just a regular two-armed freak, you pointy-headed demon kin."

He grunted his rebuttal and lifted the heavy bar from its resting place.

The heavy gates of black metal, bristling with spikes, let out a sad groan as they slowly opened. As I passed by, Corvis chuckled quietly and whispered to me, "Be careful Durance; don't do anything I wouldn't do."

I knocked his shoulder and winked as I left, "And what would that be? You old pervert, last time I did, I ended up waking up in bed with a Pit-spawn. My just reward for following your advice..." I left them behind, laughing as they pulled the door shut behind me.

As I walked down the stone path, through the green manicured grass and past well-trimmed hedges, I felt hidden eyes fall upon me. Shadowy servitors guarded the courtyard against intruders and they gave me the usual once over. For some reason, I always found the manicured lawn and the white marble palace freakishly normal, considering the Shadows that are linked from within.

I loped onto the Grand Avenue, joining other travelers walking to their unknown destinations. Above me the sky rotated slowly, trudging from blackness filled with dancing stars to a brighter miasma of colors. The air seemed to shudder and dodge, and the road was suddenly drenched in a wave of seawater. In a moment it passed back into nothingness, leaving me with a fishy smell and wet sashes for a reminder. The black cobblestones were littered with wriggling pale fish, and I trod on them, squashing them underfoot.

Cautiously I made my way past all the minor Houses, toward the Great Market. The varied numbers of travelers grew around me as I got closer. Soft clouds of pastel blue drifted across the turning miasma sky, a particular clashing of colors that annoyed my tired eyes.

Cresting the final rising hill before the bazaar, I stopped to stare at the spectacle. Hundreds of tents and buildings filled the huge open market. Buyers and sellers wandered around aimlessly and various portals opened and closed, filling the air with ripples of distortion. A rainbow of smoke issued from many openings, clouding the air with an indescribable aroma.

As I resumed my approach, I began to hear the yelling and bickering for prices grow louder. The smell of exotic animals grew more powerful and the yelps of strange tongues began to compete for my attention. I smiled at the variety of shops and distractions. I felt that I had made a wise decision, the bustle and energy of the market would soon divert me from my previous

feelings of dread.

I wandered hither and fro, glancing at all the weird artifacts for sale. I looked around to see if anything resembled the strange shard that I had pulled from the Abyss. I found nothing similar, though the array of items was staggering.

The menagerie area beckoned to me, animal calls and strange forms a plenty. I gawked at the spectacular colors and variety of creatures. Everything that hisses, oozes, flops, hops and plops can be found for sale here. I stopped and looked too long and next thing I knew, some crazy blue gnome was trying to sell me a giant cat. He gave me his pitch as I looked away in disgust.

Just before I moved on, a flashing glint of silver caught my eye. It came from inside a purple tent along the periphery of the menagerie. The sign over the door read "Azaghul's house of living metal." Curious, I pushed the flap and walked in. A strange smell, slightly sweet and indefinable greeted me inside. The tent seemed relatively clean and well lit, with metal cages lining the walls. So I entered, warily glancing around me. It seemed that I was the only customer.

There was a quick movement from behind the shop's curtain and a small, somewhat greasy-looking cadaver shuffled quickly my way.

With a gravely voice, the corpse croaked out a practiced greeting "Welcome, welcome! Good to meet you, noble lord. Do you seek to purchase a beast of living iron? Oh no, no... I can see you have better taste than that. Perhaps a silvery spider, or a homunculus made from gold would be more to your liking..."

I made a noncommittal growl and sneered at him, fangs showing. "I am just here to look. If I see something I am interested in, I will tell you."

Stepping one or two paces back, he shook ever so slightly. "No hurry, no hurry. Azaghul is quite patient. No need to rush the dead, they say." Then he scuttled off to the back of the tent, seeking a safer distance I can only assume.

I walked slowly around the tent, looking into the many cages hanging from the ceiling and stacked on the floor. Each one contained an animal or a creature that seemed to be made of intricately crafted metal. I picked up a golden feather off the ground and it was so finely wrought that I could see

the light pass through it.

Beautiful, it seemed to have been grown, not crafted. I discarded the feather and resumed my slow perusal. That's when I saw a rainbow-hued serpent, with metal skin colored like an oil slick. It reminded me of my shard and I stared deeply at it. It returned my gaze with its cold jeweled eyes.

"Wonderful isn't it?" called out the gravely voice of the shopkeeper. "Only seven marks of service for it. It's the only one I have been able to catch."

"Very much so." I replied quietly.

Loping, I walked back over to Mr. Azaghul, and tried to put on my best smile. His fake grin twitched and he cringed slightly, so I just gave up the pretense of being nice. From this close I could see his gray rotting skin had pulled taught and that he smelled just like a freshly dug grave.

"I am not interested in buying one of your admittedly wonderful pets. I am more interested in what Shadow you found them in..."

Surprisingly, the merchant found some backbone and tried to match my stare. "That's my secret; I can't have you dredging up your own supply. What would I do for my sustenance? Fresh meat doesn't come cheap."

I removed three marks of debt from my belt pouch and rubbed them slowly in my fingers. The azure stone plates, etched with the symbol of my House, are each equivalent to roughly ten complete turnings of work.

"I don't want to be your competition, you fool. I am looking for information on this." At that, I gestured to the shard of oily metal hanging from my neck. "I will pay you three marks for the information. And no more than that!" I growled at him again, smiling and moving another step closer.

Somehow he managed to look even paler and gray. "If you give you word that you won't open a competing shop..." He managed to spit that out while grimacing.

Backing a step off, I nodded my wolfish head twice. "Then I will give you my word. I, Durance, ward of Chanicut, shall not seek to compete with you, shopkeeper Azaghul. Do you want that in written contract? Or will my word suffice?"

"I will accept that, if you put it in writing..." He said sheepishly.

I nodded again, agreeing though I was irritated that he wanted my signature.

He shouted loudly to the back of the tent, "Slave! Slave! Bring me a sheet of skin and a pen! Quick you wretch!"

A small child emerged from the back of the tent. He looked similar to the animals in the cages, made from burnished silver. His face seemed

distressed and small drops of oil ran from his sad crystalline eyes. Clutched in his shaking hands was a silver quill and several sheets of tanned... skin.

Azaghul violently grabbed the quill and sheets from the boy, making a gesture as if to strike him.

"Now get back! I told you not to come out here!" the merchant barked. The child ran back behind the folds, disappearing.

The shopkeeper cackled hideously for a moment, but stopped abruptly when he turned back to me. I just stared into his dead white eyes. Several gruesome scenarios quietly ran through my head. None of them would have pleased him to know.

He quickly wrote out my words on the skin in blood red ink. Handing me the sheet of skin and the pen, he spoke with a sinister tone: "Sign here, Lord and we shall seal our deal."

I read it once just to make sure, and then signed it and returned it to him.

I took the three marks of debt and held them out in my furry claw. He quickly snatched them up and deposited them inside a pouch at his belt.

Azaghul gave me a bitter smile and then spoke with his grating voice, "As agreed, here is what you seek..."

A short while later I found the gateway that Azaghul had described to me. It was located in a curiously abandoned area, just off the main concourse of the bazaar. No plants grew here; just dust, junk and trash seemed to gather in abundance. As I moved carefully, looking for the pipe he had described, the ground bounced and buckled slightly under my weight. In the cracks that crisscrossed the ground, black oil bubbled up ominously. I had the distinct feeling that I was striding across the skin of some great boil of tar.

Farther in, protruding from the side of a small hillock, I noticed a great black pipe. Its opening was carved to resemble a huge serpent, mouth

agape, fangs bared.

I approached cautiously, stepping around the black pool of oil that formed at the pipe's mouth. The smell that wafted from the serpent was sickly sweet and a dark stream poured from its opening.

I didn't relish the concept of getting my fur coated with oil, so I stood there briefly to resume my human form. In a brief moment or two of contraction and shifting, I was back to my less dangerous human shape and I carefully crawled into the maw of the pipe.

I moved cautiously, as there was some measure of danger with this whole arrangement. It was quite possible that this was some kind of trap, and that the merchant had just sent me to a place he hoped would kill me. I doubted this however, because if I survived, he would be in serious trouble and death isn't the worst thing that can happen to you in Chaos.

Into the greasy darkness I went. I crawled in perhaps twenty feet and then I began to feel something strange ahead. Within my mind I could feel the instability; there it was, the way, the gate to the other Shadow. In the darkness, I pressed against a strangely rubbery section of pipe and slowly I pushed my fist through it. A weird sense of distance seemed to form between my hand and arm, and I could feel on the other side that there was a cool, wet atmosphere. With some effort, I pushed my whole body into the other Shadow.

It was an unpleasant sensation, passing through, my skin itched and tingled. The other side was not as gloomy as the pipe I had just left, though my eyes burned at contact with the sweet acrid air. I coughed as I breathed the thick atmosphere, and so I paused for a moment, and let my shape-shifting adapt me to this place. Soon the overpowering odor faded and became more pleasant, almost perfumed.

Walking forward, I could see that I was standing in a dark, water-filled cave. Knee-deep in cool water, I slogged toward the source of the light and the echoing sound of waves.

I emerged onto a beach of green glass and silver. I stood and stared for a moment as I turned and took in the bizarre view. Before me lay an ocean of blue, black and rainbow; great pools of reflective oil floated on blue pristine water, and black bubbles of tar rose to the surface to burst, and sink again. The whole scene had a strange feeling of movement to it, as if it

were slowly shifting back and forth. I didn't notice the reason for this till my eyes were drawn to the dark blue sky. High above hung twin bronze suns, two huge burning cubes that tumbled slowly in the air like the crazy dice of the gods. I shook my head and walked away from the cave, carefully watching my surroundings.

I found that I was standing on a long sandy beach, set below a high cliff wall of what looked like green volcanic glass. All the rocks seemed made of this clear stone, of various shades ranging from aqua blue to forest green.

Hearing the curious sound of my footsteps, I looked down at my feet as they crunched on the green bottle shards that posed for sand. My feet were golden and contrasted beautifully against the clear green sand. Somehow, in adapting to this place, I had achieved a form of a similar nature. I saw that my skin had turned gold and gained a faint, oily sheen. I smiled at this and continued my exploration.

In the air, silvery shining forms flew and flittered about, tinny calls echoing from birds of steel as they banked overhead. Walking on the green glass, I saw the glittering crabs run and hide, shining and polished, like miniature clockwork toys with razorblade claws. Blades of what resembled grass stood tall, growing on the hills facing the ocean. I carefully grabbed a handful and plucked them gently from the ground. In each blade of grass, a thin metal filament ran down its length, and the leaves seemed to be made of resin, finely grained and detailed.

I dropped the pseudo-grass with a start when I heard a faint bark echo in the distance. Alarmed, I ran up the crest of the hill and stared down the beach's length to see what was making the noise.

Perhaps two hundred yards away I could make out movement, a small golden form and a couple of darker shapes, moving in that recognizable way that dogs run. So I set out toward them, my right hand clutching the metal shard hanging round my neck.

Cautiously I made my way closer, listening to what seemed to be the voice of a child calling out, "Dent! Dent! Where are you?" I could barely make out the words over the surf, but I could hear the desperation in them.

But as I got near, the wind reversed directions and I soon heard a rather ominous set of howls. In moments, I saw them running toward me, a pair of black hounds, bristling with spikes and foaming at their mouths. From behind them the small gold figure ran, trying to keep up with their quick movements. They looked much faster than me and I knew running was a trigger for aggressiveness in most canine types, so I stood my ground. I dropped into a low crouching stance and pulled the shard from around my neck. I held it before me, to catch them if they jumped at my throat.

As the hounds got closer, I could see that the spikes that adorned them were not attached to leather, no, instead they seemed to be part of the blackened iron they were made from. Terrible to behold, they stopped a few paces from me and growled menacingly, acidic saliva dripping from their metal fangs, hissing on the glass at their feet.

"Hold it! Please stop! Don't move and they wont bite you! I promise." The voice of the little golden girl came as she gasped for breath. She walked up behind the hounds and looked at me with fearful eyes. She was wearing a simple dress that seemed to be made from woven copper cord. She could not have been more than nine or ten years old.

I replied through gritted teeth, "You have nothing to fear from me little one, allow my leave and I shall trouble you no more."

"You can go, but please tell me if you've seen my brother. He's got silver skin and hair, and his name is Dent. Have you seen him? We can't find him and he's been gone for a while..." As she spoke, small rainbow tears began to well up in her eyes.

I slowly lowered my weapon and looked at her more closely. There was a certainly a resemblance to the boy I had seen in the shop. I was stricken with indecision for a moment.

What did I care for this situation? It really was no concern of mine; slavery was a common thing in the Courts and I didn't need to get involved in some complicated rescue. Still, I was not emotionless, and something about this situation seemed to sadden me, more than I think it should have.

I thought for a second about my answer, and then replied, "I think I have seen him. But he is not in a place where you can help him, little one. I am sorry, be happy to know that he is still alive."

A look of surprise crossed her little face and she cried out "Oh

Please! If you have seen Dent, please tell my father where he is! I am sure he can get him back."

I frowned. This was getting more complicated than I wanted. It was too late though, I had let the proverbial cat out of the bag. "Take me to your father then." I sighed in reply.

We talked a bit as she led me and the hounds to her home. She said her name was Lattice and that her family lived up high, beyond the cliff. So up a stairway of green glass we walked, the hounds following obediently behind us, still giving me a watchful eye.

As we reached the top, I first saw a lighthouse come into view, carved of black obsidian. Then I saw that attached to the lighthouse was a large dwelling, made of silver and gold.

I imagine that in any normal place such an abode would indicate richness and power, but here, in a world of metal and glass, I could only guess that such things were commonplace.

Lattice led me inside a greeting room, and left to search for her father. While I waited inside the antechamber, I noted that all the furnishings were made of the same hard materials. Everything I could see was, woven, worked, and carved from cold metal. I began to miss the warm feeling of wood and cloth, the touch of life and softness of real grass.

Soon, a tall man entered, with dark cobalt-blue skin, polished and cold. His face was severe, and before he spoke, he looked me over with a disapproving eye.

His words were filled with anger, barely restrained, "If you came here to ransom my child, you will never leave here alive. If you have some other reason, speak it quickly before I find cause in you..."

I furrowed my brow; obviously this may have been a mistake. "I did not come here for that reason, or anything that has to do with your family. It is only by coincidence that I have seen your child and I thought that you might want to know that he is still alive."

He looked unconvinced. "We don't get many visitors; I chose this place for that very reason. Why, then, did you come here?"

"I came seeking to know more about this... I found it floating in the Abyss of Chaos and its nature has eluded me" I gestured at the shard of metal hanging from my neck. "I discovered a shop that sold animals from

this place and bargained for how to get here. While in that shop I saw a silver boy, who fits your daughter's description of Dent."

He nodded, frowning. "You are from the Courts then. There must be a hidden way here that I don't know about." He paused for a moment, while I remained silent.

"I have an offer for you then, stranger. If you will deliver something to this merchant in trade for my son, I will examine that shard you possess. If he refuses, then no harm is done to you and I will find other means to retrieve Dent. If he accepts, we both will have found what we desire."

His offer seemed reasonable, so I nodded back in agreement. "That sounds like a workable arrangement. What do you want me to deliver to him?"

He smiled, and then raised his hand. "Let me retrieve it; please wait here for a moment while I take care of things." He walked back into the far room and I sat down in the only chair available. I waited for perhaps twenty minutes, the hounds watching me the entire time, cold beady gems gauging my every movement.

When he returned, he bore with him a small gray lead box. He offered the box to me and I noted that the hounds shifted their eyes to it as I accepted it. It was very heavy and marked with many symbols of magic.

"Take this to the merchant. Inside is a ring, not unlike the one my daughter wears, and it will allow its owner to control these three hounds. They should be equitable in value to any simple slave. If he refuses, return the box and the hounds to me. Please let me have your shard while you take this too him, I will examine it while you are gone."

I smiled; of course, he wanted to make sure I wouldn't run off with the exchange. I removed my trinket and gave it to him. He took it and placed it in his coat pocket.

"I will return soon," I said as I bowed to him. Then I left, the hounds following me out.

They followed me in a different way than before of course, as they seemed to be locked in focus to the lead box. So I led them down the glass stairway, across the long green glass beach, to the cave where the hidden Shadow gate was.

I crossed over slowly, hoping the hounds would have no problem

with the Shadow gate. Somehow they managed the trip and seemed no worse the wear for their journey. They retained their obsessive compulsion to follow the box, something that had worried me slightly. Magic could be disrupted by traveling across Shadow barriers, I knew, and I had feared that they might have gone uncontrolled.

I crawled out of the serpent pipe, carefully watching the hounds as they followed. Above me, the sky had shifted to green with a yellow band near the horizon. I stopped to shapeshift back to my lupine form and rested briefly, sitting on the bouncing ground.

The trip back to the Great Market was uneventful, though the hounds drew some watchful eyes from the market guards. Their behavior was less than threatening though, so a few glances were all they attracted.

Eventually I found my way back to Azaghul's shop, the three black dogs in tow.

When I entered the shop, Azaghul was bickering with some tall scaly creature holding a glittering rainbow parrot in hand; the bird's head seemed to be twisted at a rather unhealthy angle. Azaghul pointed to the exit as he yelled. "I don't care how it passed away; there are no refunds or exchanges. Please remove yourself from my store before I call the guard!" The scaled one hissed some unpleasant curse then slinked out past me and the quiescent hounds.

Azaghul squinted when he saw me and then smiled as he noticed the three spike-covered hounds. In his gravely voice he spoke, "I sincerely hope you brought those in to sell, I could use some guard dogs. Some people just can't take no for an answer." He chuckled unpleasantly, reminding me of why I despised the undead.

I replied quietly, "Actually, no, I didn't bring these to sell. I am simply offering them as an exchange of sorts... Someone who values the child you keep enslaved sent these to pay for his release."

He looked at me sourly, his gray face frowning. "An interesting

offer... They look rather tame though, not very threatening. I don't know if they are worth it. They have to be trained to obey me, and that reduces their value considerably. I think you should bring something more valuable. Tell your master this isn't enough."

I stepped forward and bared my fangs. "He is NOT my master, and I think you should reconsider." I held out the lead box in my clawed hand. "In this box is a ring of binding. It will allow you to control the hounds with your very will. These are worth far more than the child. The one who offers this will not be so forgiving if I have to return to him empty-handed."

Azaghul stood quietly, thinking. "Perhaps I could accommodate this. Let me see the box."

Warily, I handed the box to him. The hounds followed it, their beady gem eyes glued to its movement.

Azaghul opened the box's latch and peered inside. He made a sign in the air as he looked at the copper ring that had been revealed. The red ring glowed softly in the box. He smiled and snapped the lid closed.

"It is a deal. Come here child, you have been released." He reached behind the curtain and the silver boy walked out.

Azaghul smiled evilly at the boy as he spoke. "This hairy one is your new master, slave. Perhaps you will serve him better than me. I don't think he is as kind as I am, though." He continued to grin, his black teeth showing as he shoved the child at me.

I caught Dent as he stumbled forward and held him tightly as he struggled. I glared at Azaghul and then tried to reassure the boy. "I am taking you home Dent, obey me and you will be back with your family shortly."

Dent calmed down slightly, though he was obviously frightened of my appearance.

"How cute, he is terrified of you. Be gone from my shop before I turn these dogs on you." Azaghul laughed, and then reopened the box, his dead eyes oozing with greed.

I picked up Dent to carry him, afraid he would run away if I didn't. We left the tent and as I walked away, I tried to relax the frightened child. "Don't worry Dent, he won't hurt you again."

Suddenly, from the tent came the sound of rabid growling.

"Obey me! Damn you! Obey!" Azahgul screamed. Quickly his screams turned to lurid shrieks that were swiftly replaced by savage tearing sounds. I whispered to myself, "No refunds, no exchanges."

I ran away from the tent and the bazaar, carrying the boy with me. He seemed resigned to his fate and had stopped struggling. When he saw the snake-headed pipe, he looked at me strangely. "Are you really taking me home?" he asked meekly. I just nodded and said: "Your father sent me to return you." He relaxed as I set him in the pipe and followed him in.

Once I had adapted to the Shadow, Dent smiled and laughed at my new appearance. We returned to the house high on the cliff, and I knocked at the golden door.

Lattice opened the door, and shouted with joy at seeing Dent. They both ran inside and I followed close behind them. Within, their father was waiting; he hugged Dent, and then whispered something briefly to him. Both Dent and Lattice ran off into another room, laughing and happy.

Holding out a scroll with my shard tied to it, the cobalt-skinned lord smiled at me. "You have my eternal thanks for returning my child. On this scroll is a detailed analysis of your shard, which is not a shard at all. In my opinion, it is a scale of the great Serpent, but I cannot be sure. All I can say is that it contains great dormant power. How you would unlock that power is beyond my knowledge."

I smiled and took the scroll and shard, placing the latter around my neck.

With a flourish, I bowed to him, then spoke, "Thank you, noble lord. One last thing before I go. I would recommend that you close the way gate to this place. The portal is down by the beach, in the back of a small sea cave. I am sure you will notice it when you enter."

He smiled and replied, "As soon as you return home, I shall set about that. I wish you well, Lord of Chaos."

Returning home to the Chanicut Ways, I found my chambers patiently waiting. Sleep came easily for me that night, and in my dreams, gold and silver children played on a beach of green glass...

Suhuy, Keeper of the Logrus, stood before the barred doors that sealed the Logrus within its secret chambers. Dressed in my colors of red

and gray, I waited patiently before him, slightly apprehensive about what he was going to do next. The rumors said that he had been in contact with the Logrus for too long, and that he was unstable in many disturbing ways. I personally just thought of him as being a strange old man with a good sense of humor. I guess I never really took rumors to heart; after all, as a Pit-diver I had to endure my own share of prejudice. Still, he could be very... odd.

He hobbled toward me, his scaled form hunched over within his red robes. "Young Durance, are you ready to essay the Logrus? Are you ready to be consumed and reborn in the fires of Chaos?" He stared at me, waiting for a response. I was about to suppress a laugh, when suddenly I felt the weight of his gaze settle on me. I felt a terrible compulsion to run away from him and this place. Struggling against the fear, I managed to speak.

"Yes. Yes, Lord Suhuy. As ready as I can be." Trapped by his gaze, I felt like I was being held by invisible knives. He chuckled menacingly, "They are always so eager to earn a bit of power, and yet they cry so when they realize what it will cost them. Perhaps a Pit-diver will scream a little less, perhaps a little more. We will see, young Durance. Perhaps you will make a nice warning for the next one who comes..."

As he turned around toward the gate, I was released from his mental grip. I sagged momentarily and had to catch myself.

Walking toward the huge gates, he grew tremendously in size; soon he was a veritable giant, towering over me as he lifted the blackened iron bar from the doors. He pushed the gates open and strode into the short hall just revealed. He turned and gestured for me to follow with his giant clawed hand. Shaking, I entered, and he slammed shut the gates behind me.

We stood in a polished stone hall, without ornament or markings, just a large empty chamber of red and black marble. In the air, though, there was a rhythmic whine, and it echoed eerily off the walls; I couldn't determine its source. Beyond Suhuy was the only other exit of the chamber, a circular loop of gold, ringing round a black void.

Suhuy's voice, deep and resonating, rattled my teeth as he spoke. "Durance, passing through that gate will take you to the Logrus, and either your final end or a new beginning. I will wait here and observe the results. Oh, and watch that first step."

I moved up to the ring and paused. There was nothing to give hint

of what lay beyond it. I tightly held my charm, my rainbow scale, as I looked into the black void. I gathered my wits in one basket, then I stepped in.

Suddenly I was blasted with a blazing purple light and assaulted by a rising and falling whine, piercing my skull. Blinded, I raised my arm to cover my face. I squinted against the glare and turned away to regain my bearings. I stumbled and nearly fell into nothingness. I saw that I was standing on a thin floating band of bone, made up of thousands of humanoid skeletons, twisted and melted into one continuous loop. Below and beyond the band there was only swirling red clouds, pierced by twitching black threads that streamed from some source within the ring.

As the nexus of all the light and sound was within the circle of bone, I turned and forced myself to gaze within.

Again my eyes burned and I reeled at the sight of the Logrus. It consisted primarily of a great writhing mass of black lines, rapidly contorting into various crude geometric shapes. From its center, a brilliant purple light flared, pulsing in time with the whining sound. All the tendrils flowed from the twirling mass, drifting slowly and twisting like threads caught in the wind.

I slowly walked along the bones, toward a tendril that had moved close to my position. From what I had been told, I only needed to grasp the tendril and then allow it to pull me inside the Logrus.

Once I got that far, my teacher said that I was just along for the ride. His only real advice had been "Don't fight it, whatever you do, because the more you resist the worse the process is." That part bothered me; was it really that unpleasant?

I reached out for the tendril as it drifted near and managed to snag my hand on it. I tried to grasp it, but there was no need. I found it sinuously wrapping itself around my arm, sliding across my shoulder and then around my back. I had to suppress the impulse to fight its embrace. It gently lifted my body off from the path and slowly I began to drift toward the whirling Logrus, suspended in the vibrating atmosphere.

A warm sensation washed over me and I felt my body start to ripple and shift strangely, as if the tendril was inducing shape-changes within me. Quickly my body was completely trapped by the spreading filament.

When the tendril wrapped across my face, a whole different view

became revealed to me. The sound faded away and the bright purple light, so burning to my eyes before, became an infinitely revealing glow. I looked down at my body and saw my bones and flesh shift and part before my vision. All the layers of my existence seemed to clarify, and my body seemed to be shifting in time to the movements of the Logrus.

Soon, I noted a couple of other things happening; several tendrils seemed to be forming a vague shape in front of me, and my scale, hanging around my neck, was vibrating and glowing with a purple aura.

I felt heady and euphoric, my limbs fuzzy and distant, as if my mind was separating from my constantly shape-shifting body. The mass of tendrils hanging between me and the Logrus had assumed a recognizable shape. It was vaguely humanoid, roughly my size. A twinge of warning passed through my mind, but it didn't look threatening.

At this point, I was wondering what all the fuss was about. This was certainly weird, but no real challenge had yet been offered to me.

As I hung there, shifting in tune to the Logrus, several threads shot suddenly out of the form hanging in front of me. They pierced through my chest, and I screamed at the penetration. More threads joined them and I felt like a butchered puppet dancing on its strings. The tendrils began to pull my body apart in harmony to the Logrus's rhythmic motions.

In a moment of horror, I realized what was happening. I struggled for a brief instant and in retaliation the tendrils jerked and twisted, multiplying my agony. I tried to gasp, but a thread was very busy at my throat, weaving, tearing and undoing my shifting flesh.

In the purple glow, I could see the humanoid form slowly filling with my transferred and transformed flesh. I was slowly being deconstructed; the threads flicked back and forth between bodies, remaking me. The pain was intense, at first burning heat, then swiftly changing to sweet coldness, just like the touch of the Abyss.

As my limbs were being removed, my tolerance for pain reached its limit and I mercifully blacked out.

Eventually, I resumed some level of consciousness and found myself in a dreamy state. Gently I floated through red clouds, purple lights flashing everywhere. Black threads danced in geometric patterns around me as I floated. Whispers and voices from people I knew spoke into the void and all

my memories were given form as moving pictures in the clouds. I was like an open book, being read by an army of invisible spectators. Through it all, I seemed to be moving toward some spot in the distance, a somehow familiar point of purple light...

As I drifted forward, now in a state of complete relaxation, a new, unfamiliar voice spoke out to me. "Tis a strange path you walk, child of light. Perhaps in time you will find the truth of your nature, but always remember what first gave you true reality."

The spot had grown closer now, and it was clearly a body, one I knew all too well. My sleeping twin was wrapped in a soft purple glow and I could see my scale shimmering, hanging from around his neck. A bright purple point burned and danced in front of us. I willed myself closer and reached forward to grasp the point. There was a sensation of merging and then my mind exploded, as the Logrus joined with me, body and soul.

Anger, rage, and hate filled me like the rains flood the desert, and again I passed beyond rational thought.

I awoke in a soft bed, thick blankets keeping me warm. A familiar voice spoke softly. "At last, our dreamer has awoken. Don't try to move very much, Suhuy had to subdue you rather abruptly."

When I opened my eyes, I saw that I was in my chambers in House Chanicut, my familiar bedroom walls around me. I looked over and saw Lady Eleanor, my matron, sitting in a chair next to my bed. She smiled her perfect grin and laughed. "You know, I remember when I walked the Logrus. Please forgive me for not warning you about the gory details."

I tried to smile, succeeded on some level and replied: "It's probably better that you didn't. I don't think I would have tried if you had told me."

As I lay there, I could feel inside me a strange new pulse, aside from my own heartbeat. I concentrated on it and it grew stronger, filling me with a feeling of dread and power. I quickly stopped, realizing what I was invoking.

She leaned close and put her hand gently on my chest, "Testing your power so soon? I would not invoke the Logrus till you completely recover. It will only bring the madness back stronger till your mind completely heals."

"What madness? I'm sorry Eleanor, I don't remember leaving the Logrus. Did Suhuy say what happened?" She looked toward the door and nodded. "Just ask Suhuy yourself, he's examining your prize."

Eleanor propped my pillow up and I could see Suhuy standing in the doorway, beyond my feet. He was holding a spiked suit of armor, red plates and rainbow scales gleaming in his hands. The armor looked strangely familiar, and I reached for my scale, finding nothing.

"Interesting, yes, very interesting..." Suhuy spoke as he sat the armor upon a dresser. It shifted and changed as soon as he released it. Pooling like molten lead, it ran down the side of the dresser and slid toward the bed. "What is that thing?" I said in surprise as it crawled under the covers and started to slide across my body. It was cool to the touch, feeling exactly like my shard had. I suddenly realized what was going on.

Suhuy looked at me, a slight smile playing at his lips. "Within your scale, just as within you, change has been invoked and given form. Your charm has become a grand skin for you to wear. And about that question, your madness manifested in a violent rage... When the Logrus returned you to the waiting chamber, you were completely mindless. Fortunately, I am always prepared for such things."

As he spoke, the armor solidified around my body, and I could feel a simple presence hidden within it, waiting for my command.

I held my mailed hand up and gazed at its perfection.

"Well, it fits like it was made for me," I said happily.

Lady Eleanor winked back at me, then stood up and walked to Suhuy.

Before they left, she turned and spoke with a serious tone, "You need to stay here Durance. Don't leave your chambers till we can verify that you won't succumb to the madness again. I will return later to check on you. Please try to get some rest." She led Suhuy out, shutting the door behind her.

Smiling, I sat up and made friends again with my old, yet new companion.

Bryan Inghram:

I have always loved Gaming, my imagination having long shifted into permanent overdrive. Being a long-time fan of science-fiction and fantasy novels as well, I somehow remained blissfully ignorant of Amber until about ten years ago. At a comic book convention I discovered the Amber diceless game and with it, Zelazny's wonderful Amber universe. In Amber I have found a perfect match for my two favorite things, roleplaying and creativity. Durance is my first creation, a ball of arrogance, street smarts, and maybe redemption. I have to give Angela (my GM) credit her Wheel of Dreams campaign inspired a desire to write that I had never had before. This tale was written as a backstory revealing the origin of Durance's suit of armor, Shardskin.

Roger, Gaming, and Me

By Jane Lindskold

I've been a gamer since 1980. That's the year D&D transformed into AD&D, the year the boxed set came out with the basic "how to" kit, the year gaming was hitting the mainstream enough that the special edition of *Newsweek: On Campus* included a short article on the gaming phenomenon.

That autumn of 1980, I was a freshman in college at Fordham University in New York. Lounging in the room of my newly-made friend Sheri Paxton (now Sheri Gormley, and still a friend), I was reading the *Newsweek* article.

"This sounds cool," I said, or something like that.

"You think so?" Sheri said, eyes brightening, just a little shy. "I got the boxed set this summer, and I tried it. Want to see if we can get a game together?"

We did. I still remember that character: Dracona, a magic user. I remember the excitement of earning points to go up levels, of weaving a story around what was essentially a very basic dungeon crawl. I was hooked.

Sheri eventually dropped out of gaming, but by then I'd found other people who had the bug. I kept playing through college, through grad school. I still credit gaming with keeping me sane while I did a Master's and Ph.D. in just over four years.

I kept gaming after I moved and started teaching college. Some of my earliest fiction was, effectively, game journals. Later, I even published a couple of game adventures in *Challenge*.

I tell you all of this so you have the background for a momentous day in 1994, a couple of months after I'd moved to New Mexico to live with Roger Zelazny. We were fairly settled by then. Books and other stuff were unpacked. We had a routine that included writing, chemotherapy, and seeing a bit of the local area, but for me something was lacking.

One day as we were having dinner I said, "I like it here, but there's one thing I miss. I've gamed for nearly fifteen years now, and now that we're settled, I find I really miss it."

Roger's response was, "I think George Martin games. Let me ask him if he has any idea where you might link up with other gamers. In the meantime, except for that one game we played with Erick[1], I don't really have any idea what this gaming is about. Why don't you try and show me, one on one?"

I agreed. Roger had turned me on to Seabury Quinn's stories about Jules de Grandin, the great detective of the supernatural. I thought to run something short for Roger in which he would play the detective, and I would provide the mystery.

First, though, a short tangent about what I think makes for the best gaming. I'm a writer, so I'll explain it in writing terms. The basic elements of any story, long or short, are plot, character, and setting. As I see a good role-playing game, the game master provides the setting; included in the setting are secondary, non-player characters. The player(s) provide the main characters. Together, game master and players provide the plot.

So, with this as a starting point, I started running my brief adventure for Roger. I told him his character was walking down a street. Before I could say more, he interrupted and with great enthusiasm started to tell me what his character was seeing.

"Whoa!" I said. "This isn't a novel you're writing. In the game, I tell you what you see. You can tell me what you might be looking to do—say, buy your daily paper or go out for a meal, but you can't simply create a thunderstorm or a car wreck or whatever."

Believe it or not, it took me a while to get Roger to understand this. He was so accustomed to having full play with plot, characters, and setting, he didn't want to give any element up. However, once he realized that what I was suggesting was the equivalent of "reading" a really good book, with the added advantage of being able to effect the action, he caught on.

Now I'm going to jump a bit in time. The setting is Bubonicon, our

[1] For more on this, see "Zelazny and the Zelaforms" in *Amberzine*, Issue #6, pp. 14-20.

local New Mexico Science Fiction convention. This convention was a turning point for my life as a local because it provided my first meeting with lots of local pros and fans. For Roger, it opened the door to gaming.

We were walking down a corridor when a woman with red hair, wearing a flowing bluish purple dress came half-running up to us.

"Hi!" she said to me. "I'm Melinda Snodgrass. George tells me you're looking for a game. You can join our group if you'd like."

So, a couple of weeks later, we did.

A few words about the group in which Roger and I now found ourselves. It consisted of a mixture of writers and non-writers. Several years earlier, the writers involved had decided to transform their long-term interest in superhero games into fiction, thus giving birth to the Wild Cards series of anthologies and novels (and eventually comic books and a roleplaying supplement). Roger had written a few Wild Cards stories, but, as mentioned above, had not done so from a gamer's mind-set. Therefore, he knew, at least professionally, and sometimes socially, several of the players. They were all pretty much strangers to me.

The group had changed a bit from the Wild Cards days. For one thing, Vic Milan and John Miller had dropped out. For another, having turned superheroes into work, they no longer played superhero games. Mostly they were playing cop/FBI games, using the GURPS system because of its flexibility.

So when Roger and I drove from Santa Fe to Bernalillio (about forty-five minutes drive south of Santa Fe) the group we met consisted of the following: George R.R. Martin (writer), Melinda Snodgrass (writer), Carl Keim (architectural student and spouse of Melinda Snodgrass), Chip Wideman (roofer), Walter Jon Williams (writer), and Jim Moore (archeologist).

The game we started with, if memory serves, was run by Carl Keim. We were part of the crew of an interstellar space ship. I played the ship's security officer, an alien named K'denree. Roger played the ship's xeno-chaplain, Schuyler, usually called "Sky." Walter played the ship's captain, Melinda one of the ship's officers, and Jim an engineer. George played an alien, a sentient rock with a strong desire to reproduce itself. Most of the adventure came to revolve around the ship's crew attempting to deal with

the Rock.

Now George is a talkative gamer. He loves nothing more than to enter into long in-character discussions—sometimes they even have a point. The Rock, with its great desire to learn more about the universe in which it now found itself, provided George with the opportunity to indulge in this tendency to the full. Roger, as the ship's chaplain, was the Rock's favorite conversational partner. Much of the time the rest of us would sit back and listen, laughing and marveling over the twists and turns in these interchanges. Everyone still remembers with great fondness the time Roger re-created from memory the famous non-denominational blessing from *Creatures of Light and Darkness* and recited it during a service before battle.

I will note that these conversations between Chaplain Sky and the Rock were not completely useless to the game at large. I was playing the ship's security officer, remember. Listening in on these long discussions I began to suspect the Rock was potentially a great threat to civilization as we knew it. Things the Rock let slip while talking to Chaplain Sky made K'denree suspect the Rock could fission at will, thus reproducing itself.

I didn't say anything, even to the ship's captain, just wandered over to Carl and slipped him a note to the effect that K'denree was arranging to dose the Rock (which ate) with a neutral but traceable radioactive element. I will always treasure the moment when the Rock, thinking it had escaped our custody and successfully fissioned all over a planet, discovered K'denree could trace each individual, infinitesimal part...

Roger and I really made a good team.

We didn't always play as a team, though. The games in Bernalillio could only meet when a fairly large group was available. As several members of the group also had "real" jobs, this limited us to weekends. Therefore, I volunteered to run a close-ended adventure for a few members of the group. For this game, we met at Roger and my house in Santa Fe. The players were George, Carl, Melinda, Roger, and a young man named Martin, who was rooming at George's house.

While the game was not precisely diceless, it was pretty close. I told everybody they could play anything or anyone that they wanted with two exceptions. One, they could not play themselves or their own profession. Two, they couldn't play an omniscient god. That was about it.

The main response I met with was incredulity, then wild delight. George played a crippled mystery writer who had a bad case of multiple personalities. For the personalities he brought along the entire stack (and I do mean *stack*) of non-player characters he had evolved when designing games for Super World.

Melinda chose to play Cyril Montana, a character who had originated in a cyberpunk game Walter had run some time back. Montana had built-in cybernetic implants and weapons, and lots of cool confidence. Carl, who had always regretted coming to the group too late to play the superhero games, played a superhero with powers of flight and flame.

And what did Roger choose to play—this with the entire universe of possibility in front of him? What did the creator of Amber and its princes, of the magically powered heroes of *Lord of Light* and *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, of Shadowjack and other highly powerful figures choose to play? A detective straight out of a Bogart movie. His name was Drumm, and other than loads of cunning, his biggest weapon was a handgun.

I have to say that Roger didn't win the prize for non-powerful characters in this one. Martin did. He chose to play an Irish dairy farmer. That's it. Nothing else. No connections to the sidhe, no strange and wondrous heritage. Just an Irish dairy farmer.

The adventure was deceptively simple. The characters were contacted by a mysterious man who offered them whatever they desired if they would undertake a mission. Each was interviewed privately, and each made his or her own deal. They met for the first time at the beginning of the adventure, and part of the adventure was whether or not they would choose to work together.

I'm not going to go into the details (for one thing, I have a novel to go write). The adventure was titled "Here to There," and was simply that. The mysterious man dropped all the characters on a beach and told them they had to get from "here" to "there" within a set period of time. I think it was forty-eight hours.

"Where is 'there'?" everyone asked.

The mysterious man just smiled and said, "Here to there, forty-eight hours. I'll see you if you get there."

They did it. Would you be surprised to learn that while all the

characters contributed greatly to the group's success, powerful weapons and multiple abilities were no more useful than a willingness to think and plan?

In fact, running that game taught me a lot about role-playing in general. Martin and Roger, maybe because their characters lacked superpowers or weapons, were more likely to think their way through a situation. They found the solution to the mystery of "There." The others provided the muscle that got them there—but often that same muscle provided problems as well as solutions.

As I noted earlier, "Here to There" was a sideline to the game played by the larger group that met in Bernallio. When we finished with the Rock, Carl stepped down as referee.2 Walter stepped in to run an episode in an on-going "cop" game. Roger and I were the two new recruits: a southern cop, and a crazed Vietnam vet. Roger was the crazed vet. I'll spare the details on this one, because Walter is covering them elsewhere.3

When Walter's cop game had to go on hiatus—partly because various players were unavailable—we played a few episodes of a game Carl put together set in a mythical ancient Japan. I played a priestess with an obsession for fixing shrines. Roger, who was working on *Lord Demon* at the time (he was supposed to be finishing *Donnerjack*, but had gotten distracted) chose to play the Chinese poet Li Po, complete with extemporaneous poetry. Walter, Jim, and Chip played ronin samurai—a wild and violent trio a friend who sat in on one game dubbed "the biker samurai from hell." We never did finish that game, and I still wonder where that interminable muddy road was leading.

When we finished "Here to There" the group in Santa Fe wanted to keep going. George volunteered to run something set on a space station. He told us our characters could come from any time in human history. I decided to play a young Hindi born in ancient times to the merchant class. Melinda brought back Richard, a character she has played in numerous cop and FBI games. And Roger...

[2] K'denree, however, had captured my imagination. I later used her as protagonist in the short story "Small Heroes," which appeared in the anthology *First Contact*. The Rock did not appear.

[3] See "Roger and Roleplaying" by Walter Jon Williams, page 37.

Roger created Oklahoma Crude, a wildcat oil man. Crude he was... Just about every other word out of his mouth was an obscenity. It was funny. It was engaging. Lest you are inclined to think this was out of character for the man whose poetic prose has been praised, and whose courtly characters have been emulated over and over again, let me remind you. This is the man who, in *Lord of Light*, spent pages setting up the bad pun "and then the fit hit the shan." The crude and crass scrub demons in *Lord Demon* were his idea, too.

We never really got to see where Oklahoma Crude might have gone. Travel intervened on regular gaming, and Roger's health began to decline. After he was dead, we tried to get the game going again, but it never really worked. We all missed the ghost at the table too much.

I'm not going to end on such a somber note. This year (2004) marks the tenth anniversary of my move to New Mexico and the gamers that I met as a result of my insistence on not giving up my hobby have remained a key part of my life.

Something like eight years ago, Walter started running a game set in late Republic Rome. We're still playing it. I started as a lady gynecologist. I'm playing a bartender/thug now. Three of the PC characters have been elected junior senators through our joint efforts. There have been other games between chapters of Rome: FBI, a return to that muddy road in Japan, my semi-legendary "Hotel California" game—oh, and one related to the materials that I used in my novel *The Buried Pyramid*.

Whenever we can, that core group still gets together. It's not easy as we all "grow up" and have conflicting responsibilities. Carl's an architect now, not just a student. Melinda has taken off for Hollywood periodically. She's also running an oil company. Walter, George, and I are all kept increasingly busy with our writing careers. Chip's still a roofer, but he's his boss's right-hand man. Jim's still an archeologist; his last project had a several million dollar budget.

Oh, and Jim's my husband now. He proposed for the first time, in character, in the Rome game, his Petronious to my widowed Amelia. Later he decided to try proposing for real. It's been fun. We make a great team. In fact, Walter's running a new side game this weekend. I still haven't gotten my character together!

Jane Lindskold:

Jane Lindskold is a frequent and most favored contributor to Amberzine, often sharing her unique insights on Roger Zelazny. Since publishing her Twayne biography of Roger in 1993, she's built an impressive career as a novelist, with *Brother to Dragons, Companion to Owls, Changer*, and (so far) four novels in the Firekeeper Saga, starting with *Through Wolf's Eyes*. For news on her recent work, check out: http://www.janelindskold.com

Seduction of the Guilty

By Terry O'Brien
Illustrated by Michael Kucharski

Seven Pattern Realms: Diamond, Pearl, Amber, Ruby, Lapis, Emerald and Jet. Each further from the others than the Courts of Chaos, yet close enough that those who know can cross between them. Each as different as the jewels that represent them. Diamond and Jet, the bright and dark Realms, eternal opposites; Pearl, the Realm that Dworkin eternally seeks to uncreate; Amber, the familiar Realm; Ruby, the Realm of blood and war; Lapis, the Realm where everything is for sale, including honor. And Emerald: the Realm of Madness, where Fiona reigns and inflicts her insane, evil genius upon a tortured Realm.

This is the setting for the "New Courts" AmberCon campaign. The seven Pattern Realms have collapsed into one mystifying amalgam, where strangers wear the faces of old friends and old enemies, to be the seed from which the new Courts of Chaos will emerge.

Serrian, the younger brother of Gervald of the House Jerroboam of Emerald, had let it slip that he and some of his companions had grown bold. Bold enough to go beyond merely thinking of overthrowing Fiona's despotic rule of Emerald, and were now considered joining Llewella's forces in Dlareme.

Then, a month later, Serrian had disappeared into the city beneath the sea. House Jerroboam was sure that Fiona had heard of the defection of the house's second heir and waited, worrying over her vengeance in this politically embarrassing and potentially fatal situation.

This vengeance was delayed by Fiona's whimsy. Instead, the entire family was invited to Castle Emerald, an invitation they feared but could

not and would not resist. Their only hope for survival was in obeying Fiona's will, hoping past hope that they could entertain her sufficiently to stave off total destruction.

But when they arrived, they were greeted warmly, as if nothing had happened. They were feasted in grand style for three days and nights. By the third night, Gervald's mother and father were almost ready to defect themselves, if only to escape Fiona's apparently sincere show of sympathy for their plight.

Gervald returned to his assigned apartment in Castle Emerald, and stopped before the door, puzzled. The family may not be great sorcerers, but they could afford to hire the best, so no one should have been able to bypass the wards around his quarters. Yet it was obvious that someone had done just that. At least, no one in the castle that was not at the banquet, for Fiona was still holding an uneasy court with his elders. She had graciously and somewhat casually dismissed him as she toyed with his father and mother under the guise of a caring friend sympathetically counseling grieving parents.

Drawing the long dagger which was the only defense he was permitted to carry, Gervald silently opened the door. The sparse apartment was softly lit by the golden light of a dozen or more scented candles that wafted a subtle perfume throughout the room.

Gervald stepped inside carefully and then closed the door and locked it, never pausing from looking around the room. In the soft light, the shadows of the room danced and wavered, but nowhere did he see an enemy.

And then, a figure moved in the shadows on his bed. "Most men who come to see me have their weapons drawn, but rarely literally," said an amused soft, musical voice.

The figure moved into the candlelight. Lying provocatively on the bed was Fiona's vacuous daughter. Brigid had spent the whole dinner, in fact, the last three days, mindlessly agreeing with everything her mother had said, while eyeing Gervald with half-hidden, predatory speculation. Fiona had dismissed her from dinner at the same time that she had dismissed

Gervald. It must have been her familiarity with the castle that had enabled her to reach his quarters before him.

Brigid rose and raised her arms to him in unmistakable invitation. An erotic scent drifted across the room, redolent of the allure of exotic flowers and spices. Gervald breathed in the heady aroma, and found his senses spiraling and swirling. He closed his eyes in an effort to clear his head. When he opened his eyes moments later, he found that he had crossed the several paces of the floor to stand next to the bed, looking down at Brigid. She playfully ran her fingers down the front of his robe.

"I take my pleasure as I can find it, whenever and wherever I find it," said Brigid. "Mother doesn't care one way or another."

Her brilliant green eyes seemed to glow in the candlelight; Gervald could see primal urges swirling deep within those eyes, urges that he found himself quite willing to surrender to. He responded with a low growl as the dagger dropped from his hand to clatter upon the bare stone floor. He climbed onto the bed, his long legs straddling Brigid. She lay back, her coppery-red hair glowing like a shower of fire against her pale shoulders in the golden candlelight.

The sash about Brigid's waist became conveniently untied, and he unfolded her robes to reveal her pale and slender form, which took on a golden glow from the light of the candles. He cupped her breasts, relishing the feel of their softness and fullness under his calloused hands. She closed her brilliant eyes and smiled as he stroked her breasts, then continued to run his hands down her sides and back up to spread apart her fiery hair.

At a word from Brigid, Gervald's robes parted, and they fell open to reveal his well-muscled chest. Brigid stroked the thick curly hair across his chest, the candlelight sparkling from the rainbow of colors of the jewels of her many rings. All the while sounding a low hum of pleasure deep in her throat. She looked up, meeting his eyes again, eyeing him now not with speculation but firm, certain knowledge.

At her unspoken invitation, Gervald leaned down and greedily fastened his lips upon Brigid's, and was rewarded with an immediate and passionate response. She threw her arms around him, as she lowered him down upon her, uniting them in passion.

"Gervald . . . " said Brigid softly.

Gervald slowly opened his eyes and gazed sleepily at Brigid lying beside him. Smiling gently, Brigid rolled him over on his back as she rolled herself to straddle him. She brushed his fair hair back from his face and started to stroke his temples, feeling for the slow beat of his heart under her gentle fingers. Slowly, deliberately, she began to blink her eyes in time to his heartbeat. Her head moved slowly from side to side, in time with his heartbeat. At the same time, she started to croon softly, barely audible, a sound that was like the soft music of a mother soothing her child, a sound that rose and fell like a gentle tide, a tide that focused his attention, then carried away any resistance he might have been able to muster.

Gervald gazed sleepily into Brigid's emerald eyes, which seemed to glow, reflecting the golden candlelight. As her head moved first to the left then to the right, Gervald's eyes seemed drawn to follow those eyes.

Brigid leaned closer. She slowly opened her eyes wider, drawing his gaze deeper into their depths. The candlelight glittered in her eyes, and seemed to awaken a soft emerald shine in their depths that drew his attention like a moth to a candle. "Sleeeeep . . . deep sleep . . . wonderful, deep sleep . . . deep, wonderful sleep . . . deep, wonderful surrender . . . " she crooned gently. "Sleep . . . deep sleep . . . your eyes are heavy with sleep . . . deep, wonderful sleep . . . close your eyes and sleep . . . " As she looked into his eyes, she felt his sleepy mind begin to respond to her gentle but irresistible hypnotic suggestions.

Soon Gervald's eyes were feeling too heavy to keep open, as they fought to continue to gazing into the fascinating depths of her eyes, which had stopped blinking and were now staring intently into his own with a force and power that gently but irresistibly compelled his attention. "Sleep . . . listen to me . . . and sleep . . . " she continued, her voice becoming more and more compelling yet still retaining its gentle caress upon his ears. "Close your eyes and sleep . . . sleep and surrender . . . listen . . . surrender and sleep . . . obey and sleep . . . "

Gervald's consciousness was now completely and utterly focused on her eyes and her voice. He knew that he needed to sleep, that he felt so sleepy, so very tired, and it was so very pleasant to gaze into Brigid's brilliant, beautiful green eyes and to listen to Brigid's gentle, musical, compelling voice. It was the right thing to do, to let himself sleep as she was suggesting.

It was the only thing to do, to surrender to her eyes and her voice.

His eyes closed and his head relaxed back onto the pillow. He breathed a great sigh as his whole body relaxed.

Brigid smiled smugly, proudly, as she continued to gently stroke his temples, and she began to speak softly to him, her voice scarcely above a whisper, yet she knew that every word was passing directly into the deepest parts of his mind, where they would be almost completely undetectable to the most potent sorcery or telepathy, except for Mother's, of course.

"Mother will be pleased," thought Brigid afterwards, impressed by how *easy* it was. In the coming months, Gervald would discover that he, too, would want to join Llewella's forces. As it was an idea that he had had himself, only strengthened, magnified and reinforced through Brigid's gentle mesmerization and not imposed by spell or domination. No power would be able to detect that it was not genuine.

Also genuine would be the passionate desire to return to Brigid's arms, and gaze into her eyes, where the secrets of Llewella's forces would be hers, and ultimately Fiona's. An undetectable spy, a spy who did not even know himself that he was a spy.

Brigid rolled off the bed and sat on its edge. She looked back over her shoulder at the sleeping Gervald and smiled. She had enjoyed the feeling that her power over Gervald aroused; the feeling of another's mind and will rendered helpless, compliant, obedient to her own aroused her desire more that she had ever known. And with the expected success of her assignment, she could look forward to many more chances for the same sort of pleasure in her future.

Unbeknownst to Brigid, Fiona had watched the entire process in her scrying mirror. She made a mental note to suggest at some later time some further study in a few areas, such as a review of the *Kama Sutra*, but Fiona was generally pleased with Brigid's overall technique. She was especially pleased with her hypnotic induction technique, even though it was aided by Brigid's own hypnotic perfume.

But she was even more pleased at the feeling she read from Brigid as her daughter had realized how pleasurable the power over others was, especially through such seductive methods. Her child's own seduction was well underway.

Terry O'Brien:

I got started in gaming in the early days of D&D and have never looked back. Over the years, I've played or refereed almost every major roleplaying system. I was introduced to Amber roleplaying at a fateful GenCon almost twenty years ago, when Erick wanted playtesters for his new Amber game. As a long-time fan of the Amber books, I was more than pleased to join. That act led to the infamous GenCon Amber campaign, still in operation, as well as a mention in the game book. I am a member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America and the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts and Designs.

A LIFE FOR A LIFE

From Just Christopher's campaign,
The Gathering
By Amanda Heroman
Illustrated by Michael Kucharski

It was gray and blessedly quiet. The predawn air was still uncluttered by the psychic disturbances that an awakened city makes. I could feel the cooks in the kitchens and bakeries across the city preparing for the day. The harbor was beginning to stir and a few revelers were on the street calling it a late night, while others were making it an early morning.

At four o'clock in the morning, very few in Castle Amber were stirring as I walked through the grounds looking for Benedict.

I found him in his garden doing Tai Chi. Standing there at the edge of the sand, I watched him silently, waiting for him to complete his forms. Tall, lean, and strong, he moved with a fluid grace and power. I loved watching him move. I could do it for hours, and often have.

He completed his form facing me and said, "Commodore Dulcinea," by way of a greeting. "Benedict," I replied. Momentarily, I reconsidered. Did I really want to do this? If I chose not to, there would always be something unsaid between us. Our relationship would never be the same. As if it could ever be the same again, now.

I walked across the sand to stand before him dressed in the black uniform of my battle group. It reflected my mood much better than my normal white and red. Black for mourning—black formal jacket, full cut and calf length, black tunic, black leather pants, black dress gloves tucked into a belt, blaster slung low on my hip and strapped to my leg. Even my braid swinging lightly at the small of my back was the black of a raven's wings. The only exception to this scheme was my skin, tanned brown from

the sun, my dark gold, honey-colored eyes, and my blades. My gold eyes narrowed recalling why I was here.

Somewhere along the line, the Princes Bleys, Benedict, Caine, and Martin had come to the conclusion that Random was not a strong enough king for our most desperate time of need. Oberon, in his infinite wisdom, had created in his youngest son a supreme being of Order. Unfortunately, Random would not achieve this potential for several thousand years, much too late to save Amber now. Oracles were sought for a way to save Amber. It was determined that a great ritual of magic upon the Pattern would bring Random to his fruition. But, "a sacrifice of the precious Blood of Order" was required to bring about this ascension so that all of Order could be saved. This blood was to be supplied by four of the best and the strongest Children of the Breeding Program. Two of those sacrifices went willingly. Two did not. The two that did not submit willingly were made to submit by force, their wills and spirits broken. They died in great pain and agony. My daughter Skye had been such a one. I and the rest of the Dukes had fought to stop the Sacrifice, and a great battle had ensued outside the Pattern room. We lost. Our Children were killed in a blood ritual upon the Pattern, their blood caught in sacrificial bowls, so that an unwilling Random could be transformed into Lucifer.

After the horror of the Sacrifice, I fled Amber to the only home I still had left, Faery. I ran to my consort Aidon, so that together we could mourn the vicious death of our daughter, Skye. I ran to tell Faery of the terrible thing that Amber had done. But he already knew. All of Faery knew.

The Queen of the Fae, Moswin, another of my daughters, had been warned of my coming. She and I were already not on the best of terms. Benedict, knowing my mind well, had cut off my retreat to Faery by turning that Court against me. He told the Fae that Amber had declared me outlaw and that there was the possibility I was trying to gather an army. The Fae were still recovering from the ravages of the second Moon Rider

War which I had unintentionally started in my bid to secede from Amber and stand as a power alone when I had held the throne of Faery. Not wanting to be pulled into any more trouble, Moswin closed the borders to me, and from other than my consorts who met me in Shadow, I found no welcome. I had no more place to call home.

So, leaving the environs of Faery, I recalled my fleet, put my forces on standby, and considered my options. I was being maneuvered into a position to go back and deal with Amber before I was ready. I didn't actually have to return, but it would do me no good to remain isolated and plot quietly from the shadows. The question then became, *could* I serve Amber? Could I look my relatives in the face after what they had done, and how best could I exact revenge for everyone's part in this? As far as I was concerned, those involved had to pay a blood price in one form or another.

But still, I could not return until I knew the lay of the land better. I thought of those remaining in Amber, wondering whom I could call. Bleys? Most probably the ring leader, so he was out. Caine? Also guilty. I hoped that he was manacled the next time I talked to him, so I could enjoy trying to find his breaking point. Martin's had been the hand that had raped, tortured, and killed my daughter in the Sacrifice. I had special plans just for him. Benedict wanted me to come back. Florimel? No help there. Gérard had hung me out to dry for the Moon Riders. Corwin was still in Chaos and Llewella stood with Rebma. That left my uncle Julian. He seemed to have had a fondness for me at one time. We had hunted in Arden together, drank together, and once he had even sought to come to my rescue.

Taking my seat at the helm of my flagship, Nama Sidhe, I shuffled his trump out of my deck and considered it. It was slick and cool to the touch. The trump came from a deck made by Bleys and was decorated with his sigil. I frowned as I looked at the back of the card. *All in good time, Bleys.* For the moment though, I stilled my mind and regarded the likeness of Julian, thinking of him. *Yes... he had come to my aid more than once. Let's hope he will come to it again.* The trump went cold as contact came with Julian. The picture on the front changed to show Julian in the hall outside his rooms in Castle Amber.

"Yes?" he inquired.

"Greetings Uncle..."

"Dulcinea," he replied coldly.

That was a little strange... but, not being long on patience, I plunged onward. "I need to ask some questions."

Julian regarded me for a long moment with a look that made an iceberg seem warm. "Why should I answer? What gives you the right to ask me anything?"

Shocked, I asked, "What ever do you mean, Julian?"

"If I remember correctly, you left. You relinquished all your rights, titles, and holdings, and left. You have nothing here. So I ask you, in what capacity are you questioning me? Are you asking as a merchant, wanting to set up trade relations with Amber, or are you asking as a commander, with a powerful armada at your disposal?" His visage was cold and closed.

Hesitantly, I replied. I hadn't expected anything like this. "I am asking as a niece to her uncle. I need counsel. I need to decide what to do."

Julian's face thawed minutely and his eyes warmed to a softer blue as he looked at me. He gave a slight nod of his head. "You can always have that, Dulci."

"I need to know what you think of the new king, Uncle. Do you trust him? What do the others think?"

Julian paused to consider, "He is much like the Random that I grew up with, but more so." A look passed quickly across his face. "It seems that everything I liked about Random is there in greater quantity, and the things that I disliked are less apparent. There is something about him that makes you like him. It is very strange..." he said, walking into his room.

A cold breeze swirled through the garden, still heavy with dew and smelling faintly of the ocean. The sun was a faint, pink glow barely starting to show. I raised my chin defiantly as my hands fell to my belt, thumbs hooked behind it next to my dress gloves. Then, in a determined manner, I pulled a glove from my belt and threw it at Benedict's feet.

"A challenge then," said Benedict unfazed.

"Yes," I replied shortly.

"By what means do you challenge?"

"With my swords and with my fists."

"Then I shall need a sword," came his calm reply.

Benedict walked deeper into the sand to a small altar carved out of stone and came back with a sword. It was a curved sword, in the scimitar fashion, made of a gold metal with a guard designed to trap and break the blade of an opponent. He stood calmly in the sand, waiting.

I went over to a side of the garden where a tree was planted. A sitting area was set up underneath it, two low benches with a table between. They were hand-carved and polished, made by someone with a love for wood. Benedict. He had made them with the same meticulous care that he did everything. Carefully, I took off my uniform jacket, placing it on the table. Just as carefully, I removed my blaster, placing it atop my coat. I let my hand rest on the table a moment.

Would we ever sit here and play chess again, as we had so many times before? Would he still come to me in the quiet times between his duties, to sit in my keep garden to talk, or to watch the dragons rise from the mist at dawn? Would I ever again sing for him at dusk, after a long day's training?

I stood there for a second with my back turned so he couldn't see my face. When I had collected myself, and knew my face showed nothing, I drew my longsword and poniard. Turning to face him, I went back onto the sand. Benedict dragged his foot back and forth to break up the surface, and then, facing off against each other, we began our dance.

From the very beginning the fight was strange. I hadn't really known what the result of my challenge was going to be and as the challenger, I would try my best to kill him. To do anything less would belittle us both. For his part, I did not think that Benedict would truly try to kill me over this, so death did not concern me. How this challenge would affect my relationship with him did cause me some anxiety; still, I could do nothing else. He, too, was answerable for his part.

I had expected that the fight would be over quickly, with me on the receiving end of a thorough ass-kicking for my efforts. Such was not the case at all. Benedict was drawing me out, pushing me to the limits of my ability,

and despite my best attempts to mete out mortal wounds he was only giving minor injuries: scrapes and bruises where I had expected cuts and broken bones. I was well aware from the intensity of the combat that this wasn't another sparing lesson. It was far more than that, but then again, neither was it a duel. As his strikes hissed around me, I looked for any possible opening. He offered none. With every calculated attack he put me on the defensive, pushing me harder than he ever had in the past.

After the Patternfall War, the new king, Random, realized that the numbers of the Blood of Order were as nothing compared to the numbers of Chaos. A call was sent out to the noble and royal houses of the Golden Circle kingdoms that had the best political relations with Amber. Random offered to grant the status and holdings of a Royal Duke of Amber to any of their number who could prove their blood tie to Oberon's line by walking the Pattern.

Obviously, such an appointment of title would be a great benefit to the kingdom in question. So much so, that even those whose origins were merely suspected of being of the Blood Royal were foolish enough to face the trial, only to perish almost immediately, their ambition larger than their reality. Others may have had the blood, but it was thinned by generations. They got past the first or second veil, far enough to have hope of finishing, but they too were consumed by the absolute force of judgment that is the Pattern. We who survived were appointed Dukes and Duchess under Random's direct holding.

It was only after the initial exhilaration of finding oneself still alive wore off that the four surviving new nobles, out of scores that had died, got around to reading the fine print. According to Random, the Lords of Chaos were many and powerful. Because of this, he had begun a breeding program of the Blood of Order that he called The Seeding to increase their number, and thus the power of the Realms of Order. We were his tools in this endeavor.

The Blood of Amber had never been especially fertile. In an effort

to amend this, Fiona, Mistress of the Arts and the Pattern, placed an augmentation on each of us in the sight of the Pattern, so that every mixing of seed and egg would conceive offspring.

By political and economic arrangement with Amber, we had been mated with consorts from the Golden Circle, especially with those families who had lost their children to the Pattern. After five years, Random moved further afield and chose four different Shadow Worlds where he had made contact with the local government. With promises of military support, or technology, or economic concessions, he had persuaded them to agree to take part in his Seeding Program. The Dukes were to impregnate as many women as those Shadows could supply. For the Duchess, myself, the agreement was one child a year.

I was sent to the Court of Queen Mab of Faery, there to have the pick of any of those Lords. I honored the treaty and bore children to the Fae, for fifteen years. Through all of those years, I always made time to return to Benedict, to learn and to practice at his side. He seemed a little disappointed that my skill with the blade did not show a significant improvement; on the other hand, my endurance and stamina increased considerably. But, then again, patience has never been one of my strong points either.

By the third hour, that patience was completely gone. *Damn him!! He's going to draw this fight out until he sees fit to end it.* I didn't like being toyed with by anyone, and Benedict was definitely toying with me, albeit in a very dangerous manner. Unbelievably, I had managed to land a couple of blows with a fist or two over the last couple of hours—not that I actually thought I stood a chance in any hell of beating him. *Maybe I could hit him a couple more times if I switched to my fists.*

I launched a savage attack, trying to carry the fight to him, waiting for the next time he would go for a disarm. *There!* I let him take my sword. Benedict caught my sword in the teeth of his and with a flick of his wrist, snapped the blade in two while ripping it from my grip. At the same moment,

I threw my poniard at his left shoulder. As he dodged, I darted in and attacked bare-handed, or at least that had been my intention. In a strange circular maneuver, he had me on the ground, closed in a grapple, coiled around me from behind.

What happened? was all I could think as we hit the ground sideways. Pain shot through my left arm as I landed on it. Benedict had it twisted up and pinned behind my back with all of my weight on it. He trapped my legs in his and wrapped an arm around my throat in a chokehold. He circled his other arm around my body and pulled me in close to him. I struggled and strained with everything I had, looking for some point where I could break his hold, but to no avail. I could not break his grip. His tensile strength, wrapped around me, seemed to flex and bend with my every movement.

My breathing was constricted by his arm wrapped around my throat, but strangely enough, he was not trying to choke me to unconsciousness. He seemed quite willing to wait and let me struggle as much as I wanted. *Damn him, he's still playing with me!* I opened my mouth to sink my teeth into his arm, hoping the pain might distract him for a second or two, long enough for me to get free, but he moved his arm just enough to prevent my teeth from getting a good grip.

He settled my neck more firmly into the crook of his arm and wrapped himself more tightly around me. His breath was a deep and steady constant in my ear. I brought my chin forward and then slammed the back of my head, as hard as I could, into his face, trying to break his nose.

The next thing I knew, I was face down in the sand. Benedict had me in an arm lock and was applying enough pressure on my shoulder to quickly snap the joint. Still I fought. The more I resisted, the more he increased the pressure on the joint, until he had increased the pressure so much, that the shoulder was close to breaking.

Why doesn't he just end it? What is he waiting for? It finally made its way through my slow wits that something was not right. Opening myself up empathically, I took a reading on him. There it was, mild, but definitely there. Benedict was aroused.

In resignation, I relaxed and surrendered to him. He released my arm and stepped back, turning away from me.

Rolling over on my back and looking up at the early morning sky, I

took a moment to collect myself and assess my injuries. Slowly I sat up on the sand, hunched over with my head in my hands. I looked up at him sideways, through hair which had come loose from my braid.

"*Why* Benedict? That was my daughter. *MY* daughter," I asked in a voice full of grief and bewilderment.

"It was an execution," he replied gravely, giving me his attention.

"That's not the way I heard it," I snapped.

"Talk to your consorts," he replied calmly.

"I have talked to my consorts. They said Amber asked Faery for a sacrifice, and Skye was offered because she was troublesome."

"It was an execution. Perhaps you should talk to your daughter."

"My daughter is dead," I replied in a flat voice.

"No, the one who is Queen."

"Oh, the one who won't talk to me."

Benedict looked out over the mountain in silence. I also sat there in silence, my arms wrapped around my knees, lost in thought.

Eventually, I asked in a quiet voice, "How could you condone their actions? How could you have been a part of that?" I wanted to understand, no, *needed* to understand.

"It had the possibility of success."

"Something else could have worked, Benedict. Some other way could have tried first."

"We looked. We explored." His voice was dispassionate. "It was the only."

"I know Bleys had to have started this He probably approached Martin first, then Caine. With each of them presenting their logic to you..." I felt the heat slowly rise up in my face as I remembered to whom I presumed to lecture on logic: Benedict, who had studied warfare for aeons. He was the best strategist, tactian, and warrior that had ever existed. He was thousands of years my senior. I was as a child to him. He didn't have to explain anything to me.

I looked away in embarrassment. My glance drifted towards the castle. "The King has volunteered some information, a gift I suppose.

"It seems that my parents really were my parents. My Amber blood comes from the MacLew. I am descended from a mixed line of the Moon

Riders and MacLew, your first brothers and sisters. Oberon's children borne to him by one of the Fae queens of old. Random's decision to make Faery my breeding assignment makes more sense now, given that I am descended from them."

"I try not to think about my brothers and sisters that came before," Benedict replied grimly.

"Well, I try not to think about the Moon Rider part. Moon Riders, uuuhhh." The very idea made me shudder. The Moon Riders hated me almost as much as they hated Benedict. He had just been killing them longer than I had. One of my driving goals, after their treachery in the second war, had been their complete extermination.

I paused to reflect on our varied associations with both the Moon Riders and Maclew. The Moon Riders were a matriarchal society human-seeming, stalwart and fair, but of demon descent. They raided across Shadow by means of the Moon Paths: paths that the light of the moon cast upon the ground. On nights when the moon was in the sky, they could show up anywhere, in any Shadow. Thousands of years ago, when Oberon and Dworkin had first come here, Oberon had used the MacLew to drive the Moon Riders out of Amber proper. Then, it was rumored, fearing the MacLew would grow too strong, he had turned Benedict loose on them. The Moon Riders claimed Amber and all of its environs as their ancestral birthright. Two major wars had been fought in my lifetime to drive them out. Those wars had been backed by Chaos.

When they had finally been defeated, their numbers devastated in the second Moon Rider War, they had eventually taken up residence in Tir-Na Nog'th. Through some magic of Gwydion's, consort to their last Matriarch, they had managed to make it material. It was now visible in Amber's sky at all times, not just at the full moon.

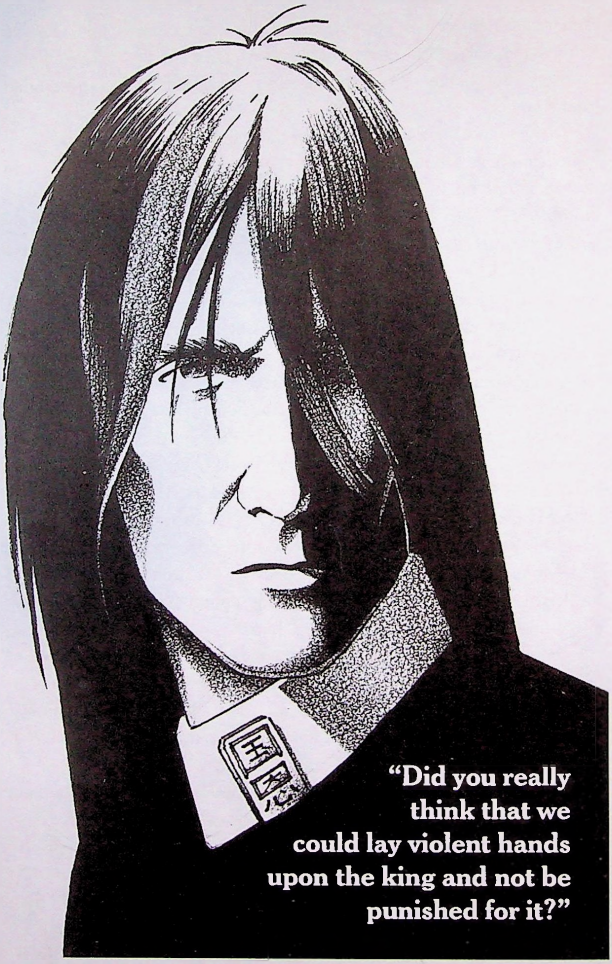
Silence again returned as we watched the sky go through its morning parade of colors.

After a time, I asked, "Do you understand why I had to do it?"

He considered me, and the question.

"Someone had to fight for them. If no one fought for them, then their deaths would have no meaning."

Raising his face to the wind, he began to speak in a quiet,


"Did you really
think that we
could lay violent hands
upon the king and not be
punished for it?"

introspective voice. He spoke of his life. He spoke of the wonder and mystery that had gone out of Amber with the death of Oberon, and that it had seemed to come back with the advent of Lucifer, the Bringer of Light.

"The king has made alliance with Gwydion, Moire, and Gérard, so that the Realms of Order will be united against the forces of Chaos in the coming war. We are to be given over to the very enemies to whom we have done the most harm, in order to secure these treaties. We are to be given over, with all of our lands and armies. It is 'our personal sacrifice' for his creation." His voice was dry.

"Political prisoners you mean. Yes, I know. I heard. Bleys will go to Gérard, to assure the treaty with Begma. Caine will go to Moire, to secure Rebma and as a betrothal gift, in honor of she and Lucifer's wedding. Martin has been stripped of everything and taken out of the line of succession. And you... you are to be given over to Gwydion and the Moon Riders," I finished in a quiet voice.

He looked down at me and raised an eyebrow. "Did you really think that we could lay violent hands upon the king and not be punished for it? Even if it was for the good of Amber?" he said softly in that deep voice of his, which seemed to cut right through me.

"What of the war? Who will lead us if you are given over to the Moon Riders?"

"Lucifer will lead. He has the knowledge of everyone who has ever walked the Pattern. I wonder, though, at the wisdom in turning me over to the Moon Riders. I will be bound to obey them in all things or the treaty is void.

"The King has also told me of your Moon Rider blood. Always, I have fought the enemies of Amber, but now... I am to be given over to them, with all of my lands and armies... Everything that is mine shall be theirs. The Moon Riders can do anything they want with me, including taking my head if they so choose. With everything that I have done to them, it would be well within their rights to do so."

"I wish there was something I could do to help you destroy them."

He was silent for a long moment, then finally in a low voice, he spoke.

"So be it."

Now what did I just agree to?

Quiet returned as we watched a hawk make a dive toward the ground. "Dulcinea... would you play your role as the Breeding Duchess, one more time, with me?" His attention was a weight upon me.

I regarded him in shocked silence. When I felt like I could talk again, I managed to croak out in a normal tone of voice, "Why?" *Why now? Why, after so many years of wanting, and waiting for you, why now?* But I knew. The prospect of being subject to the mercy of the Moon Riders had brought home to him his mortality in a way that no battle had ever done; otherwise, he might never have changed the nature of our relationship. There was no longer any more time.

"I am to be given over to the Moon Riders in two days."

I have loved you for all of my life. Striven to be like you, to be someone you could be proud of. I would die for you. But all that came out was, "I would be honored, Benedict." I held my hand up to him, and he pulled me easily to my feet.

"There is a place I know," he began. "It is in a Shadow of violence, ravaged and bloody, which I control. It is on the border of Ygg, between Order and Chaos. I would be with you there." Silently I nodded to him, and shrouding us in secrecy, he led me by hidden ways out of Amber.

Benedict's border was a harsh place. It was made up of a line of Shadows at Ygg, separating Chaos and Order. It was our first line of defense. Many would call the border evil, as well as the methods he used to create it. I called it practical.

Benedict, with his Army of Darkness, monsters of a terrible mien and temper, had attacked the Shadow folk continuously for years on end. It had made the people who lived there battle-ready, hard, and strong. A good buffer between us and the forces of Chaos.

This particular Shadow had a red-smudged, hazy sky, the kind that occurs when massive fires eat the landscape and have been burning for a long time. The kind that leaves the air itself harsh and biting on the back of

your throat.

The smell of blood was in the air even though there were no bodies to be seen. In fact, there was no one to be seen at all. I looked around and saw the signs of old battle. Nothing very recent, for the grass had started to recover and the rains had softened the ruts in the ground. The fortress that we were going to had once been of a lighter color, but was now dark with soot and streaked with blood. It looked like several someones had been impaled on the walls. Ballista scars showed through the stains. As I looked closer, I saw more evidence of damage from fighting and from siege. A tower had been brought to ruin and the battlements had been crumbled in places, but the gate, freshly made of wood, had obviously been recently rebuilt.

He led me into the fortress, through galleries, and down halls. I looked with interest as we made our way through the interior. The place had not been pillaged. All the disorder and damage that was to be seen had come from fighting, though an effort had been made to start repairs. Lowering my mental shields I reached out telepathically, searching for signs of life, and found nothing but the small creatures one would expect to find in a castle. Feelings of violence, death, mayhem, and a visceral joy of destruction pressed in on me, reverberations of those who had been here recently. Benedict's Army of Darkness. Throughout it was splashed the particular flavor that was my interpretation of Benedict.

Eventually, we came to an inner room that was clean and well appointed, with furnishings of a good, yet simple quality. He had been here for some time, for the room echoed with his presence. Maps were rolled and put up neatly in a rack. On the desk were neat stacks of papers and ornately carved wooden boxes, which I knew held his battle markers and map pins. His battered and scarred war chest was at the foot of the bed and his chessboard, which followed him everywhere, was set up and ready to go. A brown silken robe, with gold edging, hung from a clothes rack in the corner. I had given it to him one evening, when he had stopped at my keep with a special wine that he had brought to me from Shadow.

I leisurely walked over to the chessboard and picked up a white pawn, rolled it through my fingers, and then placed it back again. I felt like a little honesty was called for.

Turning to face him, I said, "Benedict, I am no longer one of the Breeding Dukes. I no longer have Fiona's augmentation. But, I have a way of ensuring fertility. Will you trust me?"

"Yes, Dulcinea," he replied without hesitation.

Slowly I stepped in closer to him, gently placing my hands on either side of his face. Standing on tiptoes, I drew him down for a kiss. I had never kissed him before. We had never done *anything* before. Softly, I kissed him, tasting his breath upon my lips. His arms reached around and drew me into a tight embrace, kissing in return. He submitted to my gentle contact, as I touched and entered his mind. I am a healer of no small skill. I can mend a wound with a thought, start a man's heart with a slight touch of my hand, or kill with a kiss. Using that ability, I moved my awareness through our bodies, making temporary changes, guaranteeing that he, as well as I, would be fertile.

Pausing, I pulled away from him to look at him: his hazel eyes, face. I traced its outlines with my hands and eyes, felt the softness of his lips, ran my fingers through his long, dark hair. It slipped through my fingers like silk, shining in the light. Spying a chair behind him, I maneuvered him into it and straddled his lap. His long fingers wrapped around my hips, pulling me in closer to him.

Not knowing if he was used to any sort of mind play, I very cautiously built upon the mental link between us, creating a flow that we both shared. My pleasure at the feel of his kiss. The way I felt with his arms around my body and in my hair, as he slowly unwound the last of my braid, so that it could cascade down his hands and arms. In return, I felt the way goose bumps ran across his body as I started kissing his jaw and biting a warm line down his neck. The way I felt to him sitting in his lap with my legs wrapped around tight. He dug his fingers into my ribs as I started to bite and suck harder at his neck.

I deepened the link still more. Feelings and emotions, wants and desires began to flow back and forth between us, permeating all of our senses. After centuries of mental play, it was easy to sort out what my lovers wanted or needed. Sometimes it was things they didn't even know themselves. So I found his hidden desires and used that knowledge to the fullest.

The chair went over with a crash as our intimate exploration of each

other grew bolder and more intense. Safely on the floor, we struggled to remove the last of our clothing, still sticky with sweat from the morning's fight.

As our merging layers of psyche blended each into the other, I could feel my power, everything that *was* me, go swirling along his skin, as his power, greater than mine, engulfed me in a blast like that of a nova.

My eyes snapped open with a gasp that Benedict echoed. Our bodies, our essences, our souls, our auras combined, becoming a single power that was too much for me to control. Escaping, it took on a life of its own which fed on our passion and rising need, becoming stronger and stronger. Impossibly stronger. We became one single entity. We knew each other's hearts, souls, and minds. There was no barrier between us.

As the power roared through us, it turned from something burning and powerful into something caressing and gentle. It was all-encompassing. It was the kind of feeling that you would wait your whole life for. I saw the sensation flow over Benedict's face as he felt it too. Slowly, we returned to ourselves.

Propping himself up with his arms, Benedict gently brushed my hair out of my face.

"Your child is conceived, Benedict," I said in a serious tone. "What do you want to do now? Do you want to go back to Amber or do you want to stay here for the two days."

He was thoughtful for a moment before he answered.
"Stay here."

I grinned at him evilly. An excellent idea," I stated, as I caught one of his fingers in my mouth and proceeded to suck on it, rolling my tongue around it suggestively.

"Indeed," he replied with a raised eyebrow.

We made love all through the day. No place was safe from us. It seemed we were trying to make up for lost time and for time that we might never have again. Finally we stopped for supper outside under the stars. As we sat there in the dark, I played on my twelve string and sang for him, while he gently stroked my hair. We sat together until the moon rose; then, softly and slowly, we began to make love on the grass. We caressed each other's bodies as if for the first time, cherished each touch, each kiss, each

sensation, as if it were the last. Bittersweet feelings flowed between us as we acknowledged that our time was almost up.

I lay in bed thinking. Benedict had already fallen asleep and was breathing quietly. He was wrapped around me like a spoon, our legs and arms entwined. I was still trying to digest all that had happened today. I still could not believe that I was to give birth to Benedict's child. *Wow*, was about all that I could think. And *wow, to the vastness of Benedict.* My mind could not encompass all of the being that was Benedict. I stood in awe of the depth of him, my lover. It would take me centuries or more to understand all of him, and this was certainly a side that I had never seen before and I knew that few people had. *I guess I'll have to accept that Duchy from the King after all. Benedict's child deserves more than to grow up in a space ship and a few Shadow holdings.*

What if he died! What if the Moon Riders killed him, I thought suddenly in cold fear. *It would be well within their rights to do so.* Benedict's arm tightened around me protectively in his sleep, as he picked up my fear along the low-level link that remained as a warmth between us. *Ssshhh, all is well*, I sent, as I soothed him back into a deeper sleep. *He can't die! Not now! I will have to talk to the king and see if he knows of a way that I may ensure his life with the Moon Riders. There's got to be something I can do, something that I can offer them for his safety. Some bargain I can make. The Moon Riders hate me almost as much as they hate Benedict. I do not know what we can agree upon.*

I thought some more and realized that I had a bargaining chip, a place to start anyway. I had something that the Moon Riders might value enough to not kill Benedict: my son by Olludieus, the Moon Rider Bard. Olludieus was dead by my hand, but his son lived on in Faery. Neysa, the last Moon Rider Matriarch, might trade me a life for a life. My lover, for her grandson.

Active thoughts woke me at dawn. I opened my eyes to see Benedict lying there watching me. *Good morning <love, affection, passion>* I sent to

him as I wrapped him in the warmth of my feelings. He blinked at me and gave me a small smile, *good morning.* I nodded as I caught his thought of Tai Chi with the raising of the sun.

It was still mostly dark outside as we began our forms. When the sun was up, with the familiarity of long years, we bowed and began going through different *kata*. From there, we started lightly sparring. Benedict was being very careful with me this morning, but then, something had been added to the situation that had not been there yesterday. A child. His child. Sweaty and relaxed, we paused for breakfast. With a gleam in my eye, I offered to show him one more *kata*, which he, in all "innocence," was willing to learn.

The rest of the day was spent challenging each other in a different way, pushing each other to the edge and then seeing how long we could stay there. But with the setting of the sun, all good things come to an end. So after a final passionate good-bye, we returned to Amber.

The next day was Benedict's leave-taking. He was in the Great Hall talking to Julian when I arrived. I walked in alone, dressed in my colors of white and red, cold and aloof, poised as the queen I once had been. The dagged sleeves of my long white gown gently brushed the ground as I walked. Red trim outlined the edges of the gown and red slippers peeked out from beneath. My loose hair was a raven fall to my waist, decorated with blood rubies that had been woven in, so that fiery sparks glinted with my every movement. A necklace of diamonds and rubies graced my neck, finely entwined together, culminating in a tear-shaped, blood ruby that hung between my breasts.

We were all dressed in our finest, assembled as we were, to see him off. Florimel, Julian, and Bleys, were there, as well as the last two remaining Dukes of the Gathering: myself and one other. Thankfully, Martin was not to be seen. Caine was already in Rebman custody.

Benedict's siblings were gathered around him loosely, saying good-bye to their oldest brother, and talking of things that only concerned them. I

stood to the side, giving them their peace. Loosely I laced my fingers together, letting my hands fall naturally to the front, so that I wouldn't twist them with worry. My stomach was a pit of anxiety.

Lucifer, with Moire at his side, entered with the Moon Rider delegation. Neysa was there with her consort Gwydion. With them were others that I did not know, nor did I care to. Neysa and I gave each other small smiles that did not reach our eyes. Only death was there. One day it would come down to a fight between the two of us and only one would walk away. How much would she give for the child of her son that I had killed? The child she didn't know I had.

The Elders parted way as Lucifer walked up and had quiet words with Benedict. They had spent much of the night together in conversation already. Clasping each other tightly, they parted. And so it went, each taking their turn to give him a final good-bye. As my turn came, I gave him a chaste kiss on the cheek, as befitted a niece to her honored uncle, and whispered in his ear. "You shall have twin sons, my love." Benedict's face was impassive.

My lover left with the Moon Riders, gone to his fate. With Benedict departed, my family went their separate ways, each lost in thought and plans of their own.

I followed Lucifer when he took his leave from the chamber. "Your Majesty, a word, if I may?"

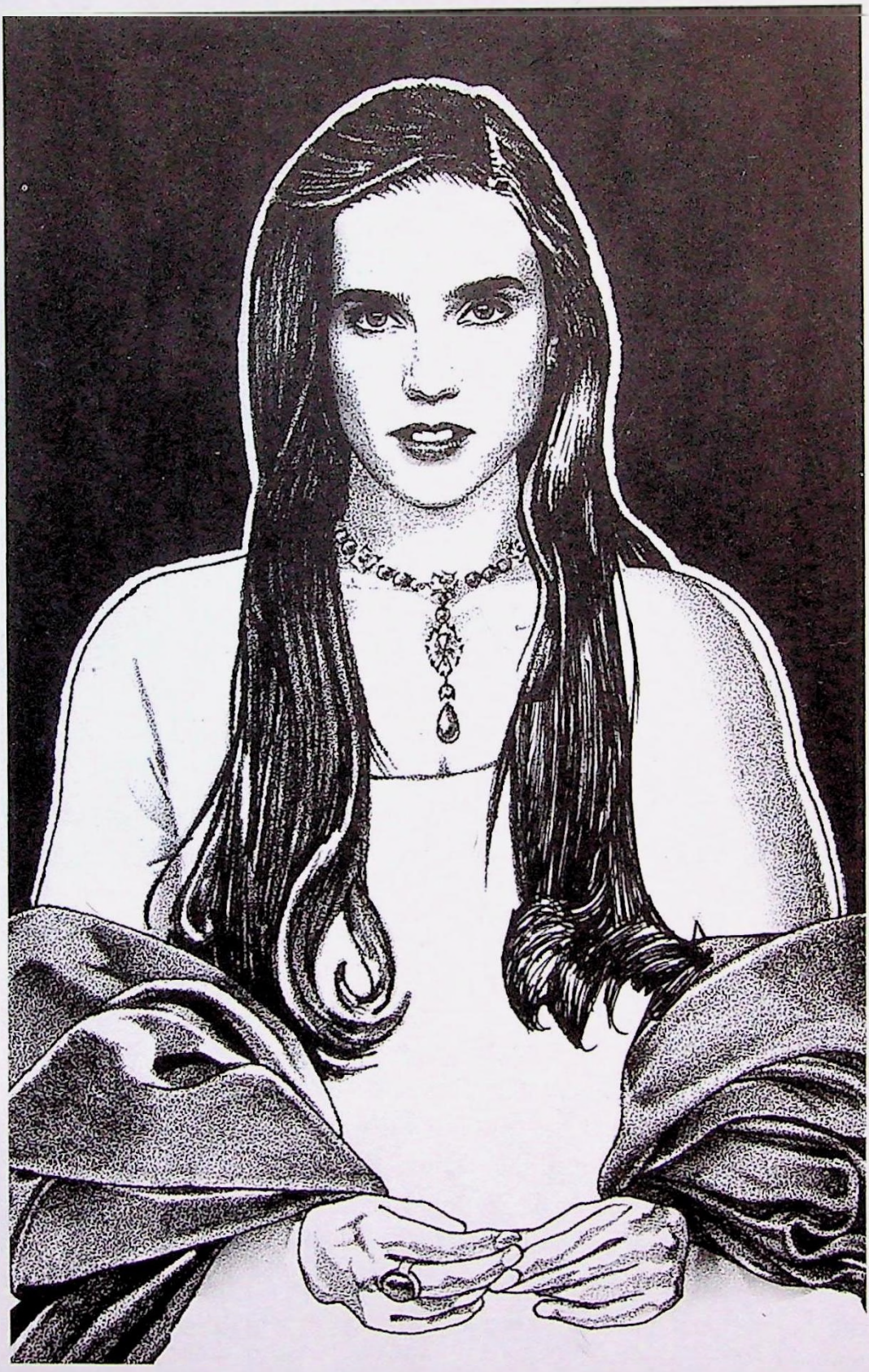
He turned and looked at me. Lucifer looked like Random, but was much different. For one thing, he was over six feet tall. He still had blond hair, but now it was thick and curling and fell past his shoulders. Where Random had been thin, he was muscular and fair of features. His powerful presence forced its way past my barriers. It made me want to trust him, to like him, to believe in him. I hated that part of him. I dug my fingernails into my hands, using the pain to clear my mind, and focused on pushing him out. I gained a little ground and held it with great effort.

"Yes, Dulcinea?"

"Your Majesty, what will they do with him? Do you have any idea?"

"That is their decision."

He looked at me gently. "They will hold him encased in a block of amber in their public square, on display. I do not know for how long. It



could be for as long as he has hunted them, or until they decide to do something else with him. I truly do not know."

"If it is not too late, I would like to accept the Duchy you offered me when I swore to you my allegiance."

He smiled. At that moment, the clouds parted in the hallway, filling it with sunlight, all was warm and good. "As you wish, Dulcinea, it is not too late."

As he walked away, I wiped my bloody hands on the breast of my dress. If the Moon Riders killed Benedict, nothing would stop my vengeance. I would have no more reason to live. My fleet of Living Ships had been created for the sole purpose of destroying Tir-Na Nog'th. I would stop at nothing to kill every last one of them. Even if I destroyed Amber in the process, Tir-Na Nog'th would fall from the sky.

Amanda Heroman:

Twenty-seven years ago, I became hooked on roleplaying when the local library had a group running a D&D game. I started writing five years ago when I became hooked on my first Amber game. Through creating those diary entries, I found that I loved writing; so much so, that I have gone back to school to learn more of the art and begin a new phase of life.

After many years of being on the receiving end of GM's, I decided to get some of my own back and ran a game using the BESM system, a game we fondly dubbed *Manda's Mayhem — A Journey into Insanity*. I then ran a short Amber campaign which I hope to continue at some future time.

When not writing or gaming, I am "Married with Teenagers," a Massage Therapist/Instructor, a Reiki Master Teacher, a Doula, and The Official Bad Influence. I can be reached at a_writing@yahoo.com. A longer version of *A Life for a Life*, which includes a prequel story is available upon request.

BENEDICT: HAIKUS

by Genevieve Cogman

A man holds a sword:
Leaves dance round him in the wind,
Orange, brown, and gold.

Leaves touch the sword edge,
Fall apart and separate,
Tumble to the ground.

The edge is bitter,
Honed by centuries of war,
Strengthened by duty.

Look at the sword blade:
From hammering and forging,
Patterns in the steel.

Does it understand
What the dancing leaves would say,
Turning in the wind?

It is the best steel:
You only see your own face
When you study it.

When you are attacked,
You will lie dead on the ground
Before you know it.

A man holds a sword:
Leaves dance round him in the wind,
Orange, brown, and gold.

TO LIVE AND DIE IN AVALON

By David W. van Dyche
Illustrated by Michael Kucharski

Chapter 1

To command is to love, and to be willing to kill what you love. My father taught me that. His entire life was command, in a place and state without much opportunity to exercise it. Growing up in a martial House without war was probably the greatest exercise in discipline imaginable.

Looking back, I can see his wisdom. While cousins waxed and waned, lived and died, well or poorly, I grew. I practiced. I developed. Duke Borel, my much older brother, was my instructor-at-arms, and he taught me a different kind of discipline. Not of the blade, which I drank and swallowed as a fish in native waters, but of the tongue. Borel was a prig, a pompous, skilled, useful ass. At times it took self-control almost beyond belief to maintain my silence. Unfortunately, he recently joined me here in the afterlife. The next few million years are going to be Hell.

So I shall while away the time by telling you my story. After all, it's the only one I know from the inside, so to speak.

It was in the shadow of my fifty-fourth birthday that General Larsus, Grand Duke Hendrake of Chaos, summoned me into his presence. Father was like that; he couldn't just call one of his children, he SUMMONED. Ever the commander. This diminished my love and respect for him not a whit. He was what he was, and if I felt some of the jaded impatience with

our elders that the spoiled young of this generation occasionally displayed, I didn't let it leak out.

In truth, I was excited. Trouble was brewing. Things were happening, not once but twice. Rumors, the stock in trade of the Courts, ran round like rats among the whisperers. This summons could only shed light on whatever was happening. War with Amber, most were saying. The elders were keeping closed mouths and short leashes.

I straightened my tunic and brushed my colorless tresses backwards over my ears. My shape remained what is called human, in the main. The Amber version, ever orderly within its disorder, has fixed what Human is, has normalized it. We Chaosites hold to this norm less rigidly. I would never pass for one of Them. Still, I had two eyes, two ears, two breasts and two arms, and if my teeth and ears were pointed and my skin moon-pale, I know I was comely to look upon in the eyes of most.

Our ageless House Dweller Kr'rl opened the door for me and I stepped through the Way, walk, walk. My second footstep met the polished ebony floor of my father's Great Hall and without breaking I strode across its shiny surface. He rose to receive my salute, then a brief embrace. I stepped back and waited. A strange moment of fraternity passed.

"Come," he said, turning. I fell into step with him, and we walked down a short, wide corridor and into the Battle Room. I was somewhat surprised to see his entire staff and retinue there. My younger brother Kurth, my cousins Tell and Winow...more significant were my father's brother Gonnol and my two aunts Kerra and Kaloye, and my father's son Borel. Kerra was my father's sister, Kaloye my stepmother's, but they were as close as any siblings ever were, and shared their spells and secrets like mingled blood. At least a hundred more of our House, all of substance, was here as well.

I took my place at the table as he began to speak. "The glory of House Hendrake has never been diminished by times of trouble. Only the opposite has even weighed heavy upon us, but no more. You have heard the rumors, you have heard the talk. I have now been given leave to tell you the plans and give out the orders."

"The abomination Amber has, until now, seemed unassailable. It disrupted our way of life, imposed itself upon our lands without even the

courtesy of conquest. The bastard children of its bastard king now assert that they are the lords of the universe, that Amber is the center, and that we are the aberration. The immoral sit in judgment of the moral, the impure of the pure. All this will change, and you will do your part."

"It has ever been our dilemma, as well as our protection, that each Ideal, Order or Chaos, wanes as it approaches its opposite. Thus, while we are safe from significant attack here, they are safe as well. No longer. A way has been opened." His eyes lit and he leaned forward, his knuckles upon the slab of ton of marble that constituted his conference table. "A way that will give us unfettered access to Amber itself!"

A mutter and shuffle, quickly quenched, then he continued. "As black is the color of the Living Void, the well from which all thing spring, it is fitting that we shall soon travel upon," and here he cued Kaloye with a nod, "the Black Road." A gesture from my aunt and a representation sprang into being upon the long table. A graphic of the Courts and Shadow, it showed a black streak extending perhaps a twentieth of the way from Chaos. I watched it for some time before I realized that it was moving almost imperceptibly outwards toward the enemy at the other end. I estimated that, if the representation were of accurate metaphysical scale, it would take something in the order of several years to reach the other end.

"This is our route through Shadow, a road that any Chaos-born or spawned may travel freely. It carries us in comfort, while warding off our enemies. We can use it to secure strategic Shadows on the way, setting up bases of logistics and recruitment to swell our armies. Eventually it will run to the foot of Kolvir itself, allowing us to bring the fight on our terms directly to the enemy." My father looked around expectantly. I was sure he was waiting with inevitable questions, nor was I wrong. Tell, ever quick of mouth and mind, opened the one and employed the other. "How was this accomplished, Uncle?"

The reply caught us all off guard. "Classified. You'll just have to take it on faith that it has been arranged as I have said. Countess Kerra will give you a full briefing on the ins and outs of the Black Road, how you will use it, things to avoid. This will be followed by operational orders, which Duke Gonnol will relay as appropriate. I just wanted to make the announcement to you all, in person. I know you will all execute your missions

as befits Hendrake." His eyes swept over the assembly once more, then he turned and marched out.

Silence hung for a moment, then the murmur started. Discipline was one thing, this announcement, decidedly another. For Hendrake it was a call we had spent our lives awaiting...and some here had seen the founding of Amber.

I sat through the briefings, riveted. No longer did I watch my comrades fight boredom as they drank in another set of operational orders. Gambling without stakes holds no interest; this time the stakes were our power, our glory, our honor, and our lives. I was not so starry-eyed that I did not take a full set of notes. I glanced at Tell across the table, and saw that he was doing the same. He gave me a brief, tight smile. Sad that we could not marry within our House, for he had always been my favorite cousin. Rules, especially for us of Hendrake, were rules.

Later that day, as I ended a well-earned meal, an imp scampered up to me bearing a message from my aunt Kerra. Finishing quickly, I followed the wide-eyed creature as it led me through several Ways, the last of which I had never entered. Kerra and Kaloye were both waiting for me, in what I deduced was the public room of one of their quarters. Kerra's, I guessed, as they were somewhat disorderly, and Kaloye is as finicky as they came.

"Sit down, Lintra." I took a place, somewhat on edge, on her sofa. They sat down across from me, two peas, and regarded me with what I interpreted as a mixture of pride and sadness. I wondered why.

The answer was not long in coming. As usual, it started with a question.

"Are you wise, darling daughter of Chaos?" Kerra's eyes twinkled but there was something, a hint of intensity, that warned me not to be flippant. I considered a moment, and then answered. "No, revered aunt. Wisdom is an expensive commodity, and I am aware of my deficits in this regard."

"A fair answer, but an incomplete one. The true answer is, of course, no...and yes. You will have to act wise beyond your years, for the task we will set you will be a difficult one."

"I am ready to meet any challenge, Mistresses."

"Oh are you, child? Any martial challenge, I suspect, but this is something different. This will strain your sense of duty, and you may well

find that honor has more faces than you once thought."

It was not wise to push these two, but I felt that Kerra was toying with me, and I sensed Kaloye growing slightly impatient, so I felt like I could get away with it. "Rip the bandage off, please, the quicker the better. I have much to do, even without this new task." I regarded her more calmly than I felt, and I watched her for any sign that I had gone too far.

Well, that had apparently shut her up for a moment. She seemed nonplussed, and Kaloye took over the silence, her more measured tones belying the growing horror of her explanation.

"We want you to be the mother of our salvation." A beat. "Literally."

I clamped down firmly so that my jaw would not drop. I am sure my eyes unfocused in confusion for a moment. She went on.

"This war is a dicey business. Conquest seldom solves anything. In fact, the best warrior is the one who wins without fighting, for the glory is not in the fight, but in the victory. I know our beloved blade master would disagree," a twitch of a smile, "but that is one reason your father is still Grand Duke Hendrake and has not passed the title to Borel. Also, every good warrior has more than one way to victory."

"The blood of Amber is strong. However much the official line denigrates them, however much they are our enemies, they are worthy opponents, and we need their blood. We need to even up our opportunities, for, as you well know, Dworkin, last scion of that now-accursed rebel House Barimen, brought the blood of Chaos to the realm he created. We have no corresponding blood of Amber. Without that blood, the power of Order is forever barred to us. There are several projects underway to obtain this vital heritage. You shall be one of them. Does that sting enough?"

A prickly feeling playing under my skin and in my heart made its irritation known to me as I controlled my emotional reactions to her announcement. So calmly they sat there, telling me that I was to be some kind of whore of war, selling myself for their hope of power. I opened my mouth to tell them where to plant themselves, and then shut it. Isn't this what they had just said? That this would strain my sense of duty and honor? I found this challenge not at all to my liking.

"Details. Please." That was all I could get out. I needed time to think.

Storm and drought, ice and fire, point and counterpoint flowed for the next hour as I fought their logic, their desire, their...wisdom. In the end I could not refuse. The clincher came when they assured me that my father had no direct knowledge of this thing they were asking, for he was far too good and honorable a man to condone such filthy usage of his daughter. The order came from the King himself.

That it had to be done, I was convinced. I would not put the task off on someone else, and I knew I had within me the strength to bear it. To bear...her.

When I left my aunts, I moved as an automaton, back through the Ways to my apartments. I barely managed not to vomit. Irony, that...I would have my fill of nausea soon enough.

Chapter 2

I had taken the Logrus some years back, a natural progression as the heir to my House. I was no sorcerer, though. No taste, no aptitude. The Logrus gave me sight, and insight, and power. The niceties of magic held no attraction for me. I understand that the Amberites had their analogous situations, except that magic was more difficult there. In the Courts, sorcerers were common as cow chips. Not so in Amber. I toyed with the thought that for all its strangeness, in some ways I might be more comfortable there. Ridiculous.

Now it was time to employ that power again. My natural mother was from Haedus, one of the most stable and livable shadows of the Black Zone. I found it ironic that those who worshipped Chaos with such devotion still valued orderly arrangements in their own lives. Perhaps this was why Amberites acted so Chaotically. The dichotomy lives and breathes deep in all of us. But I digress.

Haedus was my second home. It bred warriors of renown. It was natural that, between marriages, when Father sought a bride, he came here. Instead of a warrior, he found a healer, and a shaman. My mother was a holy woman, and her grandfather had been of the Blood of Chaos as well.

It was a place of endless plains, covered with a thick grass that was more indigo than green. Most of my mother's people were nomadic, though

there were a few small towns where the Rooted lived. That grass fed the abundant zherch, a small migratory herd animal. The horses in turn fed on the zherch. In the wild, the horses hunted in packs, driving the zherch together into a frightened mass, stampeding across the herd in a disciplined line. After one or two passes, the horse herd came back to finish off and eat those that had been trampled. Natural selection determined that the weakest, the old, the very young or the sick were killed in this way, while the strongest and quickest survived. And there were always more zherch, as long as the grass grew, brought down by bolas or traps.

The horses were, in turn, food for the People. Their milk, their flesh and their blood were available to drink or eat, as necessary. The lifestyle was a simple one.

I rode into the camp of my mother, Cendra. Born to the life of the shaman, her powers were not inconsiderable, by the standards of Shadow. As her daughter, and the daughter of a foreign noble, and a holy warrior in my own right, I walked my mount unmolested to the center of the encampment. My mother had stayed with my father for fifteen years, but eventually could not abide the closedness of the Courts; she was of the sky and the wind. Fortunately, Trumps brought easy contact, and so this arrangement was not so distant as it might seem.

I had not trumped in; because I wanted to reacquaint myself with the landscape. I rode Twilight, my great gray stallion. An uncut male is always a handful, and I calmed him with my touch even as I heard the answering snorts and brays from the locals tethered about.

I rode in also because I wanted to be seen as a warrior, rather than as the witch they sometimes thought me. If you wanted the fear of women in this place, be a sorceress. If I wanted their respect, I had to be a warrior.

Oh, perhaps I should mention, in this society, the women were on top. My favorite position, though the Courts had taught me that there are as many forms and customs as there are shadows, with none intrinsically superior. Still, it's better to be the hammer than the nail. Fate had made me female. The men here were marvelous craftsmen, artists, healers and shamans. The women, however, went to war. For this, I had come.

In the privacy of my mother's tent, in her embrace, I finally broke down. I spilled out the tale of my mission, my orders, and my destiny in one

long paragraph. She stroked my hair and told me lies. No, Mother, everything did not turn out all right.

Still, she helped me achieve clarity, strengthened my resolve, and bolstered my will to achieve that, which was asked of me. I remain eternally grateful that my father had chosen this woman, and no other, as his wife, even if only long enough to bear one daughter.

I walked among her people then, and stole them away in the tens, the twenties and the hundreds and the thousands. I rode to bordering tribes with my entourage, greeted each time at first with suspicion, later with a warrior's eagerness to do battle. After all, I was giving them something they had long awaited: a chance to fight for glory and honor, without risk to those whom they would protect. In my mother's name I guaranteed the safety of their civilians, brought their leaders together to drink the cup of alliance, and carried off with me the best of them to die.

Eventually came the appointed time. I had recruited my legion, shaken them down, banished the troublemakers, and forged a sisterhood of arms such as this shadow had never seen. They would sing songs of us here, yea, unto the end of the age. At the start I had had over fifty thousand warriors. In the end, I had nigh unto sixteen thousand disciplined soldiers, a mounted mailed fist subject to my will, a body that would form the core of my army. An army built, if they only knew, not to conquer a kingdom, but to overtake one man. I felt proud and sickened all at once, as I remembered my father's words about command. To love, and to kill what you love.

With the concurrence of my father, I had laid my will upon the time stream of this shadow, slowing it down so that, in the year that I forged my legion, over four years had passed in Amber. Ironic again that we of the Courts kept Amber time as a reference, for before Amber, time was what we made of it. Now, however, it was a convenient point of commonality, no matter where or when one was. My father once said that if you allow yourself to hate your enemy, he will control you in the end. I marveled again at his wisdom.

This manipulation allowed me to begin my campaign with my troops at their peak, rather than bored of waiting. We formed up in a column eight abreast, and began our march down the Black Road. It was a beautiful thing, this military movement. Easy, flat, no dust, no opposition. In some

shadows we passed by armed forces observing the road. They never challenged us.

Chapter 3

We proceeded at a quick, steady pace. We carried our arms and armor, spare mounts with extra gear, but no logistical train. Those in advance of us had prepared the way farther forward, and a messenger came to me in our camp that night with detailed packet of plans, maps and instructions.

I read that our campaign was going well so far. My father's troops had already established themselves at key shadows out to the halfway point. From earlier briefings I knew the Road avoided shadows with the technology of electricity or even gunpowder. While useful, technology seldom survived passage from one shadow to the next, unless one deliberately walked among such places. We also had no desire to encounter rifle-armed troops who could fire upon us from cover, negating the advantage of the Road. Trying to use such things ourselves would have complicated our logistics beyond belief. Fortunately, such energies seemed as foreign to Amber as to the Courts. Oddly, another point of congruity.

The offensive outlined in the packet showed several strong forces had left the Road and conquered key shadows past the Median. These shadows were to be invested with the forces of Chaos, poured into them by nobles of the Blood, and garrisoned by our conquered peoples, summoned creatures and those of the Courts willing to administer or even annex them. The road was key to all of this, for it allowed passage throughout shadow to all without effort. It conducted magical energies, and strengthened the power of the Logrus in its vicinity. How it had been effected, I still had no knowledge. Whoever came up with it I am sure was to be well rewarded.

My legion was to recruit and summon along the way, seeking creatures of all sorts either willing, or compellable, to provide the fodder for our conquest. Reinforcements and supplies would flow behind us. Several legions such as mine would begin their incursions with near simultaneity in a number of important shadows near Amber...the most real ones. Normally this meant that an Amberite dwelt there; these were, of course, targets. Each Legion should be able to deal with one Amberite plus the shadow

troops there. While normally we would be considerably weakened near the Center of Order, the Road would sustain us with sufficient Chaos energies to balance. There was, of course, an interesting problem in metaphysical logistics; with several simultaneous campaigns occurring, everyone would be stretched thin.

Kerra was to join me by Trump when I arrived. I would have preferred Kaloye, but you can't always get what you want, some bard once sang. She was to aid us in battle magic, neutralize any enemy wizardry, and assist in putting my hidden task into effect. So, suffice it to say, I arrived, and soon, there she was. I pulled my hand free of hers as soon as practicable.

In this shadow, the Road happened to be underground. In a way, this was convenient, as it hid our initial arrival. The horde of flapping, grunting, crawling and leaping things spread out into the enormous cave complex, and we had to secure our water supplies to ensure they were not being fouled. Sixteen thousand horses and riders caused cramped quarters indeed, and I resolved to commence the campaign in the open as soon as possible.

Scouts told me we had arrived at night. The moon was new. Perfect timing, whether luck or skill at planning I cared not. I sent out raiding parties with instructions to capture as many as possible, kill any who could not be captured. I needed information.

The prisoners taken that night said this place was called Avalon, with the city nearby holding the same name. Here dwelt the one I was to hold concourse with, he named Benedict, Prince Martial (or Marshal, if you prefer) of Amber. In this place they called him Protector. I was certain the name was well earned. Still, we had the advantage of surprise, intelligence, fear, and the ability to turn his troops against him. He would be a worthy opponent, but in the end, Avalon, and Benedict, would be mine.

Our initial forays went very well. We raided as long as possible, to deny the local forces an understanding of our numbers, and to swell our ranks with ensorcelled infantry. These men serviced my hellmaids' appetites as well, as the conquered always do. There were enough of the dead, animals and people, to feed my Horde. The raids struck fear into the hearts of the enemy, as did facing their former comrades. Only the Protector himself held them steady.

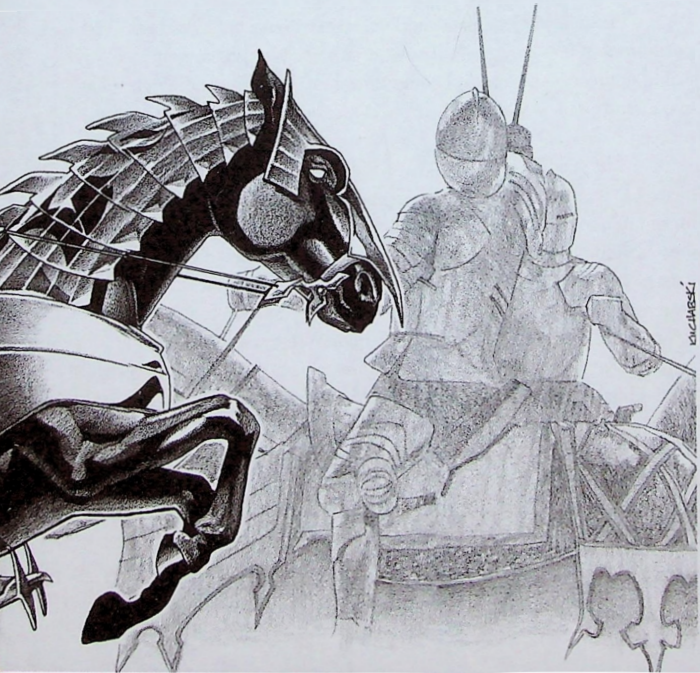
It was at this time that I must admit, I overreached myself. I underestimated Benedict. Our successes had lulled me; I avoided disaster narrowly indeed.

It was at the end of our strongest raid yet. Our ravaging parties, swelled with booty, were returning to the main cavern entrance, when we were struck with great cunning. I heard a rumble within the walls of the cave mouth where I stood, and observed one of my captains pointing upward. "Rockslide!" she cried, and within seconds, I saw the evidence. I narrowly escaped inside the cave before being buried alive, so I only heard what happened next from the survivors.

Somehow, a force of mounted knights had infiltrated to the slope overlooking the cave mouth itself. As soon as the slide expended itself, a rider on a great striped horse-beast, a long curved cavalry blade upraised,

gave a signal. A brigade of heavy cavalry, at least five hundred strong, crested the hill at a trot, and within seconds was at a canter, then a gallop. My sister soldiers, to their credit, dropped their booty and made ready to receive the charge.

It didn't matter. Everything was in the enemy's favor. Dawn was just starting to crest, my sisters were tired, downslope, crowded and disordered. The knights rolled over us as surf over sand-walls, and buried us under their pounding hooves and grim-set lances. Benedict himself led that charge, and everything his blade touched began to burn. I had never seen this phenomenon, and was initially skeptical when I received the reports. As it turned out, it was true. Imbued with the Pattern that extended to everything he touched, the blood of those he struck down ignited. Kerra and I were not there to assist them by quenching these flames, so the casualties



were horrendous. I lost more than a thousand that day, and the Legion's morale was shaken. Thus began a legend for House Hendrake that continues to this day. I had not yet understood what a creature was Benedict. I thought him something of a combination of my father and Borel, perhaps even the best parts of both. I learned over the next weeks that he was something still more. If there is an avatar of War embodied, then surely, Benedict is he.

So we found ourselves frustrated for a time. The caves were sealed: we found all but the smallest entrances stopped up, with rocks, pitch, and guards with siege engines. Every foray we made was beaten back. This fury of a male was a master of siege craft as well, and we soon learned he had shadow-sorcerers with him. Oh, none that could stand against Kerra, but sufficient to slow, and to warn, until reinforcements came. We needed something more. I called for aid from my father, by Trump. In the meantime I contemplated my task.

I suspected Benedict would not meet with me until I had achieved a position of at least rough parity. After all, what had he to gain? And he would not respect me unless I could show him something more than what I had already. It was vital that he respect me, but not hate me, for my task to succeed.

The sappers I needed arrived within a week. Short, squat, manlike, bearded, they labored mightily in the underground. My father was a formidable commander indeed, to have had the foresight to recruit such as these. Shadow was a never-ending resource, if one used it well. They dug for me now, dug a tunnel to a place far from the mountain where we were besieged, and when the time was right, and opened an entrance where four riders could gallop abreast in only an hour. We burst forth after our long confinement and sent the Horde in all directions to ravage and harry, while I assembled more than half my legion afoot, the rest mounted on our flanks and covering our rear, to clear the siege lines.

We surprised them, as I thought we would, and overwhelmed them, though they fought stubbornly. My legion paid dearly for the victory, another thousand or more dead, but at least three times as many of the enemy were killed or captured, and the rest were driven off. We also took siege engines and supplies. Try as I might, though I never got closer than a bola-cast to where Benedict was fighting, mounted on that horse-shaped thunderbolt.

There was a brief lull in the fighting, and I had a chance to bring forth the Logrus to test his Power. I struck at him with tendrils then, not expecting success, but wanting to try his strength, and to give him pause.

Interestingly, I achieved more than I had expected, at least initially. I bowled him and his close guard over, but one tendril struck some object of power in the melee and recoiled with a jolt that pained me. Pattern Trumps, I guessed. I immediately lifted and tossed a large hunk of wood at him, but he was not dazed and avoided it easily. A moment later my sight revealed the unmistakable evidence of Pattern energy, and I desisted with my Logrus sending. While Logrus is more far-reaching and flexible, the Pattern holds more raw power, so I could never hope to penetrate his defenses once they were in place. Still, he stared at me across the battlefield, there behind his works and his pointed stakes, and I knew that he now knew who opposed him. Then the tide of battle swept us fresh away, and I had to look to my troops.

The Protector brought out the bulk of his army intact in a fighting retreat, and though I gave our mounted contingent leave to pursue, Benedict had planned for even this, and had ambushes, deadfalls, and strong points at bridges and fords, which took a toll and allowed them to escape. Still, it was a victory, and I had expected no less than a difficult fight. It was all the sweeter for it.

Chapter 4

Now, I believe, the time was right. As the day broke, I handed a leather case to my lieutenant, Sirra, who cantered her horse steadily toward the enemy-held bridge in the distance. Her lance flew the white flag I had been assured would be recognized for parlay. Underneath, the banner of Chaos and that of Hendrake fluttered. Just out of bowshot she slowed, then rode proudly onward at a walk. Of Benedict's honor I had no doubt, but after a good drubbing, some warriors might not be able to resist such an easy kill.

Sirra passed without incident across the bridge, now hidden from view by the enemy troops and the slope of the ground. A half-hour later she came back, sans case. She rode up to me and saluted, and reported, "It is

done, Commander." I nodded. Now came the waiting.

Some of the men were setting up a pavilion of great luxury on the trampled ground in front of us. Kerra used some minor applications of power and magic to smooth the ground around, and flowers sprang up of their own accord along a pleasant white pathway. Other men began to cook; still others, bringing up cases and boxes and crates, began to prepare the pavilion for our visitor. I hoped. My troops retired to the caverns to rest, bind wounds, tell stories, and recover. I could see the sappers opening and improving the cavern mouths all over the mountain. If they tried to seal us up again, it would be quite difficult, and expensive, if at all possible.

Sirra stage-coughed near my left shoulder. I looked over at her with a raised brow.

"Commander...Milady..." She paused.

"What is it, spit it out!" I was tired, impatient, dirty and sweaty. Oh...I looked down at myself, and I could see Sirra's relief as I answered my own inquiry. I quirked a smile in her direction and headed back for the cave entrance and our bathing complex, recently improved by the wonderful sappers. I do believe that some of my sisters were so grateful that they invited some of the squat muscled men to bathe with them, and dally as well. Well, I had seen stranger things in my end of the universe. I didn't care who my company was at this point, I needed a bath.

Sometimes it's good to be the queen. I got plenty of room, a couple of attendants to scrub my back, wash and comb my hair. It was all quite nice until Kerra came to put the finishing touches on. If I ever get married, I'll make sure to forget to invite her. She will make someone one hell of a mother-in-law someday. She already felt that way to me.

Still, she was accomplished, and well prepared. When I looked in the mirror, I had to admit that I looked better than I ever had. Magic can be a wonderful thing in the hands of an adept. "I laid just a touch of charisma on you as well. Not enough to make him think he's being influenced, but just something to give you that little boost you need." I was delighted enough with my own reflection, for once, that I didn't even bother to object to her meddling or her backhanded compliments. I guess in this case it was her task as well.

When I returned to my quarters I found new garments laid out for

me, richly chased in crimson and silver. I dressed slowly, preparing my body and my self for what must be. It must be right, it must happen the first time, for there may not be another. I altered my appearance slightly, shortening and blunting my teeth somewhat, making my nails less like claws and more like...well, more ladylike anyway. I regarded my face in the mirror. High cheekbones, wide-set eyes, a high hairline...I put a bit of color into my face, going from my natural bone-white to something more ivory with a hint of pink highlights. My eyes I left their natural deep smoky violet, my lips gained a redness most men found attractive. I rearranged my body mass a tiny bit more to narrow my muscular waist, brought up my bust line...anything to enhance my desirability to him with whom I must congress. I hated myself every moment of it, even while accepting my fate.

Finally the appointed time came. I rode forth from the cave mouth, sidesaddle, because of my long skirts. This was child's play for one born to the horse as I. I saw him leaning upon a long staff, his lean form wrapped scarecrow-like around it. He did not move. His blade was within easy reach behind him in his saddle scabbard. He regarded me from underneath his eyebrows as I came up, the slightest of smiles ghosting about his lips.

I dismounted in one graceful sliding jump, immediately approaching him without fear. I knew him to be an honorable man, and though I was sure he could reach his blade in an eye blink, or use that staff with similar effect, I knew he would not harm me under the flag of truce.

My servants had been ordered off, and if Sirra and my staff watched warily from a distance, I knew some of his men did too. It did not matter. The pavilion was made of three layers for insulation and privacy, and my aunt had laid further spells upon it to affect our designs. Subtle she was, since Benedict would probably sense any hostile sorceries, even though no sorcerer himself. Therefore none of the spells were in any way antithetical, only benign, beneficial, and enhancing.

"I have laid spells of privacy upon this place," I said as I regarded him from arms length. "You are under my protection, and nothing here will harm you."

He continued to gaze at me, and I blushed in spite of myself. This brought something of a fury to me, so I used a bit of it to turn the blush into irritation. I felt he was trying to provoke me, to test me, and I was determined

to maintain my self-control. I wondered then whether Kerra had not ensorcelled me too, to make me comely and my behavior seemly. If she had, it would be a mistake. I didn't think Benedict was they type to be easily trapped by womanly wiles of the traditional sort. Time to take control of the game.

I moved around him then, to confront his great horse-beast. I spoke a calming then, and he regarded me without hostility as I drew forth Benedict's blade. I felt his gaze upon my back, as I brought it around in a few lazy cuts that deliberately whistled backward over my shoulder within inches of his head. Let him interpret that as clumsiness or great skill, as he wished. I returned the blade to its scabbard in one smooth backhanded movement. Maybe I was just lucky.

Bringing forth my best-pleased smile, I turned and presented my offhand arm for his taking. This should have presented him with a dilemma, as he would have to take it with his strong right. He did not hesitate, but locked up my arm smoothly in his and we strode, together, into the tent. He seated me courteously in one of the chairs, and he took the other. I only later learned that he was functionally ambidextrous, at least as far as weapons were concerned. Well, not all tactics achieve their results.

I smoothed my skirt in my lap, and then leaned forward to pour the wine myself. He glanced about pointedly, and I said, "No servants, no eavesdroppers, no worries. Your skill in combat is well known, and would doubtless buy you enough time to activate that Trump you have pinned inside your sleeve, even if I meant treachery, which I do not."

Finally he spoke. "What do you mean, then, Lady..." "Lintra is my name," I said. I waited with some disappointment. He did not seem to recognize it. "Of House Hendrake." His eyes narrowed.

"A House of warriors, if I am not mistaken."

"You are not." I looked him across my cup a moment longer, took a drink and put it down, steepling my fingers. "We are at an impasse. I have the field today, but you will doubtless maintain your opposition. Why do you care about this Shadow?"

"Why do you?" he asked.

I answered. "A fair question. I have long wanted to meet you. To defeat you, in fact. It would make my place in the Courts very secure to be

the one who defeated the great Benedict of Amber, and drove him from the field." This was purest fabrication, of course. My place was not in any way insecure right now. I had practiced this tack often enough that I was able to deliver this line with absolute sincerity.

"That is all?" Ego is often where the great ones are most vulnerable, so I mustered all my finesse and proceeded.

I allowed myself to blush just the tiniest bit, deepened my breathing, and allowed a slight sweat to break out on my brow. I silently blessed Suhuy for hammering into me my skill at shapeshifting. "As I said, I was interested in meeting you, the ideal warrior. I know of the warrior...but...what of the man?" I made no move toward him, deeming that far too obvious. I held his eyes with mine, however, and allowed a slight glow to creep into them.

He stared at me for a long moment, and I broke the contact as if embarrassed, stood up and began to serve us. He made as if to rise and I waved him back, saying, "You are my guest, milord. If you will not allow a lady to serve, then simply allow a sister in arms to share a meal with a respected comrade." He made a small noise, perhaps of amused exasperation.

"How old are you, Lord of Amber?" Anything to get him talking about himself I felt would help my cause. "Older than you, I suspect," he replied, and I grinned at him without artifice.

"I am fifty-four by my own reckoning, so do not fear you are dealing with a child, nor some jaded elder." I proclaimed.

"Is that what you think of me, your jaded elder?" His mouth did not smile, but his eyes might have. "I am a prisoner of duty, milady, but that does not make me jaded. I wear my chains without bitterness, for the love of Amber."

This elicited what I would call my first completely genuine response, and I knelt and grasped his left hand in both of mine, feeling the strength there, showing a bit of my own. "Then you understand what duty, and love, and loyalty compel us to do. It is even so with me, my lord, but I would not kill you unless I must. Even now, reinforcements are being sent to me, and I will conquer in this place. I know you will put up the best defense you can, but my will is not to kill you. Please!" and I pulled him to me, me to him perhaps, on my knees, him seated at my table, and I kissed his calloused

hands then, then his lips, because it seemed the right thing at the right time.

I do not know what turned this duty of mine into a pleasure. Hero worship, perhaps, or a geas laid (ha!) on me by my aunt. I only know that I loved Benedict then as I had loved no other. Perhaps because no other had fought me as well; perhaps because no other man save my father had my respect. It is said that we fall in love with the Image of our parents. Perhaps this is also the way of it. At the final tally, that night, we settled nothing of the battle, and all of everything else.

I awoke with a warrior's instinct, but it was not needed. He regarded me from across the pillow. I do not think he had moved from sleep, but his eyes were open and I had felt his attention upon me, even in my dream. "Good morning," I whispered. What an inane thing to say; still the right thing to say. That ghost of a smile returned, but there was pain in his eyes. "Morning, it is." I heard his unspoken contradiction.

How long we lay there, I do not know, just enjoying the silent company. I reached out carefully and traced a scar down his chest, almost healed. I wanted to prolong the moment, so I raised an eyebrow.

"A Moonrider out of Ghenesh gave that to me. My troops had not arrived, so I stopped them myself."

"Them? How many of 'them' were there, milord?"

His eyes lowered, seeing somewhere inside himself. "Many," he said. "Too many. Thousands, perhaps. I killed them all." Here his teeth clenched. "All, and one more." He stood up abruptly, and I realized the moment was unraveled, never to be knit up again. I grieved inside, but I also knew that I had won already, inside. I had what I needed, inside, and I realized abruptly that I also had what I wanted, and wanted what I had. The rest was...secondary. Outside.

He faced away from me as he put on his garments of orange and yellow and brown. I rose to help him, but he spoke one word.

"Don't."

I withdrew. I arrayed myself again as befit the daughter of a prince of Chaos, and met him by our horses. Both beasts looked at us warily. I wondered then how they had gotten on in the night. I had heard nothing, but I was sure they were unhappy to be left saddled and tacked. Still, I didn't see any chunks taken out of either one; they had survived the night.

Unlike us, they were unscathed.

He mounted, and then looked down on me for a moment. "Duty calls." He paused a moment, as if deciding to speak further. "If you will leave this place, you have a future. If not, you will soon join your ancestors in the Void. In either case...good-bye."

He turned and road off, and I did not let him see the tears or the triumph in my eyes.

My servants tore down the pavilion and I retired to my quarters, to do the things that I must. Kerra was waiting for me, but I banished her with a curt word. I was, after all, Commander here. I prepared for my journey as well as I could. It was mostly mental. Then I called Sirra.

When she arrived, I handed her my baton and a packet of orders. "You are in command now. Follow the orders. Prepare for my return. Do nothing to allow Benedict an opportunity to make decisive gains. You have the advantage of numbers, but he is by far your better, so again I say unto you, sister, be cautious, be conservative, and await my return." She bowed her head in acquiescence. She would carry out my wishes. I could check on her by Trump, anyway. Kerra was staying with her for magical support, and, frankly, as a commissar. "Oh, and keep the sappers working, hard. They will be rewarded at the end, but for now, burn them at both ends."

I pulled out my trump for Kaloye. It was now that I appreciated that she was the one who would see me through the next year, and not Kerra. I opened my mind to the contact, and it came quickly. "Kerra let me know of your success. Are you ready?" I nodded, reached, stepped.

Chapter 5

Kaloye's personal pocket shadow was pleasant and homey. Or at least, it was now. We had handmaidens and imps to serve us, bards to entertain us, expert game-players to hone my skills as the girl-child within me grew. Time here ran at close to a hundred times faster than normal; unfortunately, I couldn't opt out of living through it.

I had time now to reflect some more on my part in this twisted plan of the King's. I could not find it within me to hate the child I felt inside of me, but I could hate myself with abandon. I had done my duty, and in doing

so, found that it conflicted even more than I had thought with my honor, my happiness, and my desires. I wanted to go to him, to be with him, somehow, to raise this child together. I was held in the iron grip of duty. The child would grow, would be a hothouse flower, the mother of a king. Kaloye had told me that the signs were that my child would not breed true to Human norms. For the plan to work the king must be human, therefore I was not to be the mother of a king, but the mother of the mother. This suited me well enough, as I could distance myself from the process and get back to what mattered to me most. Dara was to be her name.

It was around three months later that I became aware of something unexpected. I had begun sending my awareness inside me, using my mind and my shapeshifting ability to examine my child more closely.

Children, as it turned out. One girl...and one boy.

I contemplated this for over a week before I decided to tell Kaloye. Perhaps growing up in a tough shadow had taught her different lessons than the Courts-raised Kerra. Perhaps she was, though a sorceress, still a warrior at heart. Perhaps I simply trusted her.

After I told her, she thought for a long time, there on the divan overlooking her back garden. I was content to wait, knowing her mind ran deep. Finally, she spoke. "No one else must know. No one else NEED know. They did not want a son, so you shall not give them one. I shall spirit him away and he shall be raised well, in a place where men as well as women can be anything they wish. A place unconnected with the Courts in any meaningful way, off in Shadow. I can watch over him, and retrieve him later. I will not even tell Kerra." I saw the wisdom in what she said, and agreed. What was this one more straw upon my camel's back, compared to the weight of my duty already?

Time wore on, in that place. When the days were accomplished, I was delivered. It was child's play to withhold the boy until after the maids and servants were gone, and we brought him into the world together, my aunt and I. I fed him there, next to his sister, and I kept sequestered until they were weaned. I named him Ishmael, after my mother's grandfather. At this time, though my heart was breaking within me, I gave him into Kaloye's care, and kissed his smooth brow one last time. "Until later, little one. Do not forget your mother."

Soon, it was time to part with the other as well. Time being what it was; I could not raise my daughter. Besides, she was just a conduit for the future King, a pipeline for the mingled Blood of Amber and Chaos to flow through his veins. Kaloye would see to that, here, in this place, where time fled as we fought our separate battles. I could visit every three days and a year would pass. It was just the way of things.

Now, from this place, I know that my daughter Dara's first child did not breed true; his name was Kwan. He was never to be told his heritage, but lived a short life in the courts before dying upon Corwin of Amber's blade, there at the edge of the Pit. Another pointless loss.

So, Dara had a daughter named Varlise, this time by a shadow man of no note, in order to increase the chance of humankind resulting. She also grew within the bullet of time that Kaloye supervised, and in her time, delivered another failed son. The vagaries of power and genetics fated Varlise to become a true Chaos Lord, master of all the disciplines, but still deemed not to bear the one who would combine the greatest of Powers within.

So Varlise begat Dara, after her mother, often called The Younger. The point was moot, as Dara the Elder died somewhere within the Logrus. Some thought it odd that our House buried her remains with full honors, rather than with the shame that usually accompanied failure in our greatest challenge.

And you all have read that Dara was the mother of Merlin, by Corwin. This second infusion of the Blood of Amber finally yielded a true child of Order, yet a child of Chaos as well, and he became, not King in Amber as Sawall had desired, but instead, Sawall's own successor. If there is a God above all gods and powers, his name is Irony.

These stories you already know. Mine will now continue.

Chapter 6

I returned to the battlefield four of their days and more than my year later. They had fortified, but now that we were abroad upon the land, they would have to fall back or be overwhelmed strongpoint by strongpoint. I was sure Benedict was simply buying time, so I did the unexpected. I sought another way. Besides, I did not need to slaughter any more of his men. His

was the weaker position; I just had to twist the screws.

My Horde swept all scouts from the field, effectively blinding my opponent, denying him knowledge of our movements. I sent contingents of my hellmaids to conduct feints at his strongpoint, to demonstrate, to feign river crossings, to essentially simulate a much larger force. I led the majority of my troops, about twelve thousand, in a wide strategic flanking movement to threaten his rear. I wanted to bring him to battle, rather than have him retreat behind the walls of Avalon.

I estimated he had about a thousand of his heavy knights, another thousand medium cavalry composed of mailed sergeants, two thousand longbow men, six thousand infantrymen and a rabble of peasants and skirmishers. Mentally I doubled all those numbers, to give myself some margin for error. I expected him to come up with more troops somewhere; from a neighboring shadow, perhaps even some of Amber's own, something. Then again, he would want to handle it himself, without calling on others for aid.

Nor was I wrong. When we broke through his defense perimeter and closed upon the walls of Avalon, we found a force from my nightmares arrayed before us. I am glad I had given him but four days; more time and I am sure he would have had too many.

Pike men. Damn. We had experience with pike men, but it was all bad. Fortunately they had little warning, and we slew all before us and overrode anyone who got away. Most of them were not armored, and only a few had enough time to grab their long weapons and array themselves into rough phalanxes before we cast our bolas and rode into them. Still, the carnage on both sides was horrendous.

Our horses did us good service, as most human troops do not really expect horses to tear arms off with carnivorous fury, or exhale sulfurous fumes, even though they have been briefed. These troops had never actually faced us, and so they paid with their lives. We broke his pike men, and scattered them. I let my outriders pursue and kept a core of four brigades, about eight thousand, in a disciplined mass. My Horde reported back to me that the Protector had used the ten minutes we took doing this deed to form up his army and march on us.

We were now between him and his city walls. We stayed out of

bowshot, though some missiles from heavier engines fell among us. I spread my troops out facing him, with lots of charging room in front of us, a rearguard against sallies, and my Horde filling in everywhere my troops weren't. The night and the harassment of the creeping, flapping, slavering things meant we owned every bit of terrain that they did not actually have boots upon. This was of great advantage to me.

Now came the moment of the Commander. I had loved. It was time to kill what I loved. I steeled myself, knowing that there was no other way. The lots were cast, there upon the dark sward in the moonlight before the silver towers of the place called Avalon. I would lose, or win it all.

I had planned to catch them as they emerged from the woods, but Benedict did not conform to my plans. He had taken some extra time, and arranged for his infantry to emerge, spears forward, all at once along the tree line. By the time we would hit them, they would be set nicely, with their backs to the woods, eliminating our chance of overrunning them, reforming and charging back through. I also did not know what might be waiting in the woods, and I did not see his cavalry. So I waited as well. He thought that time was on his side. He planned to hold me here until daylight, to weaken me, to trap me between his force and the walls.

Behind me my sappers proved their value yet again. In the former camp of the pike men they had already begun digging with maniacal, magic-aided speed. In less than half an hour they had thrown up fieldworks to protect my flanks, and unbeknownst to the defenders, were already tunneling under the walls of Avalon. If we had to spend a day in the open without my Horde, we would have our own walls to defend from, and by nightfall the silver towers would begin to fall.

Nor was I wrong. Benedict initially declined to assault my works, choosing instead to set up lines to keep me from moving far. The mountain of our origin was barely five miles away; the sappers had already tunneled from there to here. Now we had complete communication with our rear, even an escape route if necessary.

I do not know what went wrong or right the next day. Perhaps they detected our tunneling; perhaps a leap of intuition on his part made him loath to give me time to bring my plan to completion. Perhaps because what I did made no sense, he figured that his lack of knowledge was more

dangerous than trying to take us behind the works. Whatever the reason, I had miscalculated yet again, or perhaps, he had outthought me. They hit us at midday.

I was as ready as I could be, but the bright light overhead was not to my troops' liking. The horses fared even worse, and my Horde was hiding in the caverns. I had no doubt that Benedict had arranged that scorching midday sun. I could not shift shadow to bring even a cloud, here in his stronghold.

Still, our walls of packed earth were high, and we had brought out our bows, and sheaves of arrows. The sappers manned small but effective ballista and scorpions. The engines from the walls of Avalon could not reach us, so we tore into Benedict's advancing troops with our missiles and held them at the berms. It looked as if we were going to win the day easily when I felt the dirt begin to crumble under my feet. It was then I saw Benedict, his shadow-sorcerers in a protective ring around him, staring in my direction, and I felt with unnatural clarity the manipulation of shadow he was conducting. I am sure it had taken some time, but in this type of warfare, there is time. He had held sway in this shadow for long enough that I could not counter his warping, and I realized that we would soon be fighting to hold a breach in the works.

I summoned the Logrus then, and pouring power into it I caused the sod under his troops near the growing breach to explode outward. We needed a breather, and I signaled Kerra to stop trying to break through the magical defenses around Benedict and begin to employ her talents in more pedestrian ways. She imitated my lead and soon the enemies in her area were falling back in disarray. I called for a charge.

My reserve, me at the van, poured out of the breach and into the open. Realizing immediately what I was about, Benedict fell back toward his mounted knights, held in reserve for just such a situation. I had to reach him before he fled to their safety, so we charged without forming ranks in hopes of catching his entourage in the open.

Our horses were much faster than his knights', which I do not think he had fully anticipated. My Twilight was faster still, and as he had been held eager against this moment, he exploded like a racehorse from the blocks.

When Benedict realized he would not make it, he turned at bay,

blade held high, ordering his men.

I was at least fifty yards ahead of my charging hellmaids, and his bodyguards must have thought they had me. I could see Benedict countermanding them even as they interposed themselves, but it was too late. The valiant knight in my way had no concept of what anathema he faced. I was death incarnate. My charging stroke shattered his sword, shield, arm and neck, and I swept past his broken body to engage my love in mortal combat.

Fencing matches can take hours; duels, tens of minutes. Real combat, with skilled fighters doing their utmost to simultaneously murder each other, was considerably faster. At a gallop, our horses could cover fifty yards in less than two seconds. My line behind me struck his bodyguards and mowed them under. Just a few seconds later, his charging knights and my sisters impaled each other in a great shuddering cacophony of screaming horses and riders. It was only a backdrop to my awaiting destiny.

I came at him obliquely, to the right, so we would be cross body at first. I had resolved to end this quickly, one way or the other, and I was not wrong. He wheeled his horse and forced mine to the right, so now we were side by side, he on my left. I had hoped to employ my last trick to defeat him, but I had to use it now just to save myself. I transferred my blade from my right hand to my stronger left, simultaneously pulled my helmet free, threw it at his horse's head, looked my love full in the face, and struck with my blade.

Only such a thing could have won, against my Benedict. I could see him hesitate as the full force of the memory of us hit him, my left-handedness adding to his mistake as he parried on a line far shy of optimal. His blade went spinning from his right hand and I thought that I had won. My reverse cut, perfectly placed, took his right arm off just below the elbow. My body, drilled by decades of discipline under Borel, could not betray me even as my heart screamed its pain.

My mind betrayed me instead. I should have taken his head. Even now, I believe I could have done so. His mistake was in remembering me as a woman. My mistake was in thinking of him as a man.

I watched then as he performed the impossible. As his right arm spun away in a spray of blood, his left, with unthinkable grace and speed,

reached out to snatch his blade from the air and drive it through my body. So unexpected was this that my parry had no chance of saving me. I felt my blood begin to burn.

I struck him then aside the helmet, weakly, which caused me to drop my blade, and he released his hold on his own. It remained within me, and he tore off his belt and wound it around his arm, using his teeth to draw it tight as he withdrew.

I backed my horse and made my way away from the fighting, his blade still lodged inside me. My wounds were flickering and smoking, but I was able to quench them. I should have lived.

Then, oddly, I felt a hand upon my shoulder, and another on the hilt of the blade. I looked up into the eyes of a strange man, mounted but fresh and unarmored, bearded and sinister-looking. "Rest well, Daughter, you have done your work. I am sorry, but I must now send you to the Void. He must have no love but Amber in the coming times." Strange, to call me Daughter, for this was not my father. And yet, somehow familiar.

"Who—" and he lovingly twisted the blade, and I felt my blood begin burning anew. I was helpless in his grip, and looked into his eyes. "I die the final death, and so will I know you. Ahhhhh....the rebel son..." Thus I died, there upon Benedict's blade, by Oberon's hand, a pawn in the grasp of my King, a tool for my aunts, and a fool for the one I loved, and as we all are in our time.

Perhaps someone will find this. Perhaps a pit-diver, or other brave soul, will convey it to someone who cares. Perhaps someone will remember me, which is all any of us can ever hope.

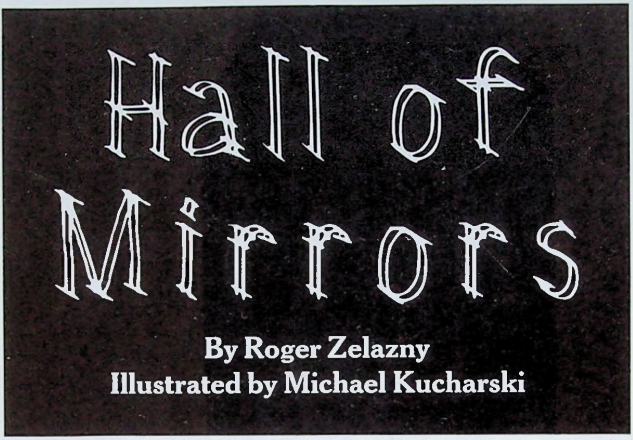
The Void isn't so bad. Perhaps, as is fabled, I might even find my way back...someday.

Anything to get away from Borel.

David W. van Dyche:

David W. van Dyche is a longtime roleplayer, storyteller and writer, who spends his days Keeping the World Safe for Democracy, and his nights running his "My Enemies Have Sweet Voices" play-by-forum Amber DRPG campaign. His greatest printable fantasy involves becoming inordinately wealthy in order to buy The Amber Corporation and revitalize the Amber metaverse with authorized fiction from great writers. He lives in Belgium at the behest of Uncle Sam, and enjoys living and traveling with his lovely wife Beth, his children Stephanie, Chad and Michael, and their two ferocious Pekingese, Chloe and Kira.

This story began as backstory for one of the characters in the game, and somehow morphed into what you read here. It is also a plausible fill-in for a piece of the genealogy between Benedict and Dara the Younger. Kudos and brickbats are welcomed at wirednun111@yahoo.com.



Neither of us realized there had been a change until a half-dozen guys tried an ambush.

We had spent the night in the Dancing Mountains, Shask and I, where I'd witnessed a bizarre game between Dworkin and Suhuy. I'd heard strange tales about things that happened to people who spent the night there, but I hadn't had a hell of a lot of choice in the matter. It had been storming, I was tired, and my mount had become a statue. I don't know how that game turned out, though I was mentioned obliquely as a participant and I'm still wondering.

The next morning my blue horse Shask and I had crossed the Shadow Divide 'twixt Amber and Chaos. Shask was a Shadow mount my son Merlin had found for me in the royal stables of the Courts. At the moment, Shask was traveling under the guise of a giant blue lizard, and we were singing songs from various times and places.

Two men rose on either side of the trail from amid rocky cover, pointing crossbows at us. Two more stepped out before us—one with a bow, the other bearing a rather beautiful-looking blade, doubtless stolen, considering the guy's obvious profession.

"Halt! and no harm'll happen," said the swordsman.

I drew rein.

"When it comes to money I'm pretty much broke right now," I said, "and I doubt any of you could ride my mount, or would care to."

"Well now, maybe and maybe not," said the leader, "but it's a rough way to make a living, so we take whatever we can."

"It's not a good idea to leave a man with nothing," I said. "Some people hold grudges."

"Most of them can't walk out of here."

"Sounds like a death sentence to me."

He shrugged.

"That sword of yours looks pretty fancy," he said. "Let's see it."

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said.

"Why not?"

"If I draw it I may wind up killing you," I said.

He laughed.

"We can take it off your body," he said, glancing to his right and left.

"Maybe," I said.

"Let's see it."

"If you insist."

I drew Grayswandir with a singing note. I persisted, and the eyes of the swordsman before me widened as it went on to describe an arc calculated to intersect with his neck. His own weapon came out as mine passed through his neck and continued. His cut toward Shask and passed through the animal's shoulder. Neither blow did any damage whatsoever.

"You a sorcerer?" he asked as I swung again, delivering a blow that might have removed his arm. Instead, it passed harmlessly by.

"Not the kind who does things like this. You?"

"No," he answered, striking again. "What's going on?"

I slammed Grayswandir back into the scabbard.

"Nothing," I said. "Go bother someone else."

I shook the reins and Shask moved forward.

"Shoot him down!" the man cried.

The men on either side of the trail released their crossbow bolts, as did the other man before me. All four bolts from the sides passed through

Shask, three of the men injuring or killing their opposite numbers. The one from ahead passed through me without pain or discomfort. An attempted swordblow achieved nothing for my first assailant.

"Ride on," I said.

Shask did so and we ignored their swearing as we went.

"We seem to have come into a strange situation," I observed.

The beast nodded.

"At least, it kept us out of some trouble," I said.

"Funny. I'd a feeling you would have welcomed trouble," Shask said.

I chuckled.

"Perhaps, perhaps not," I replied. "I wonder how long the spell lasts?"

"Maybe it has to be lifted."

"Shit! That's always a pain."

"Beats being insubstantial."

"True."

"Surely someone back at Amber will know what to do."

"Hope so."

We rode on, and we encountered no one else that day. I felt the rocks beneath me when I wrapped myself in my cloak to sleep that night. Why did I feel them when I didn't feel a sword or a crossbow bolt? Too late to ask Shask whether he had felt anything, for he had turned to stone for the night.

I yawned and stretched. A partly unsheathed Grayswandir felt normal beneath my fingers. I pushed it back in and went to sleep.

Following my morning absolutions, we rode again. Shask was taking well to hellrides, as well as most Amber mounts. Better, in some ways. We raced through a wildly changing landscape. I thought ahead to Amber, and I thought back to the time I'd spent imprisoned in the Courts. I had honed my sensitivity to a very high degree through meditation, and I began to wonder whether that, coupled with other strange disciplines I'd undertaken, could have led to my intangibility. I supposed it might have contributed, but I'd a feeling the Dancing Mountains were the largest donor.

"I wonder what it represents and where it came from?" I said aloud.

"Your homeland, I'd bet," Shask replied, "left especially for you."

"Why do you read it that way?"

"You've been telling me about your family as we rode along. I wouldn't trust them."

"Those days are past."

"Who knows what might have happened while you were away? Old habits return easily."

"One would need a reason for something like that."

"For all you know one of them has a very good one."

"Possibly. But it doesn't seem likely. I've been away for some time, and few know I'm free at last."

"Then question those few."

"We'll see."

"Just trying to be helpful."

"Don't stop. Say, what do you want to do after we get to Amber?"

"Haven't made up my mind yet. I've been something of a wanderer."

I laughed.

"You're a beast after my own heart. In that your sentiments are most unbeastlike, how can I repay you for this transport?"

"Wait. I've a feeling the Fates will take care of that."

"So be it. In the meantime, though, if you happen to think of something special let me know."

"It's a privilege to help you, Lord Corwin. Let it go at that."

"All right. Thanks."

We passed through shadow after shadow. Suns ran backwards and storms assailed us out of beautiful skies. We toyed with night, which might have trapped a less adroit pair than as us, found a twilight, and took our rations there. Shortly thereafter, Shask turned back to stone. Nothing attacked us that night, and my dreams were hardly worth dreaming.

Next day we were on our way early, and I used every trick I knew to shortcut us through Shadow on our way home. Home... It did feel good to be headed back, despite Shask's comments on my relatives. I'd no idea I would miss Amber as much as I had. I'd been away far longer on countless occasions but usually I had at least a rough idea as to when I might be heading back. A prison in the Courts, though, was not a place from which

one might make such estimates.

So we tore on, wind across a plain, fire in the mountains, water down a steep ravine. That evening I felt the resistance begin, the resistance which comes when one enters that area of Shadow near to Amber. I tried to make it all the way but failed. We spent that night at a place near to where the Black Road used to run. There was no trace of it now.

The next day the going was slower, but, more and more, familiar shadows cropped up. That night we slept in Arden, but Julian did not find us. I either dreamt his hunting horn or heard it in the distance as I slept; and though it is often prelude to death and destruction, it merely made me feel nostalgic. I was finally near to home.

The next morning I woke before sunup. Shask, of course, was still a blue lizard curled at the base of a giant tree. So I made tea and ate an apple afterwards. We were low on provisions but should soon be in the land of plenty.

Shask slowly unwound as the sun came up. I fed him the rest of the apple and gathered my possessions.

We were riding before too long, slow, easy, since there would be some hard climbing up the back route I favored. During our first break I asked him to become once more a horse, and he obliged. It didn't seem to make that much difference, and I requested he maintain it. I wanted to display his beauty in that form.

"Will you be heading right back after you've seen me here?" I asked.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that," he responded. "Things have been slow back in the Courts, and I'm no one's assigned mount."

"Oh?"

"You're going to need a good mount, Lord Corwin."

"Yes, I'm sure."

"I'd like to apply for the job, for an indefinite period."

"I'd be honored," I said. "You're very special."

"Yes, I am."

We were atop Kolvir that afternoon and onto the grounds of Amber Palace within hours after that. I found Shask a good stall, groomed him, fed him, and left him to turn to stone at his leisure. I found a nameplate, scratched

Shasko's name and my own upon it, and tacked it to his door.

"See you later," he said.

"Whatever, Lord. Whatever."

I departed the stables and headed for the palace. It was a damp, cloudy day, with a chill breeze from the direction of the sea. So far, no one had spotted me.

I entered by way of the kitchen, where there was new help on duty. None of them recognized me, though they returned my greeting with due respect and did not object to some fruit I pocketed. They did ask whether I cared to have something sent to one of the rooms, and I answered "yes" and told them to send a bottle of wine and a chicken along with it. The afternoon head chef—a red-haired lady named Claire—began studying me more closely, and more than once her gaze drifted toward the silver rose on my cloak. I did not want to announce my identity just then, and I thought they'd be a little afraid to guess ahead at it, at least for a few hours. I did want the time to rest a bit and just enjoy the pleasure of being back. So, "Thanks," I said, and I went my way to my quarters.

I started up the back way the servants use for being unobtrusive and the rest of us for being sneaky.

Partway up, I realized that the way was blocked by saw horses. Tools lay about the stairs—though there were no workmen in sight—and I couldn't tell whether a sections of old stair had simply given way or whether some other force had been brought to bear upon it.

I returned, cut around to the front, and took the big stairway up. As I made my way, I saw signs of exterior repairwork, including entire walls and sections of flooring. Any number of apartments were open to the viewing. I hurried to make sure that mine was not among their number.

Fortunately, it was not. I was about to let myself in when a big red-haired fellow turned a corner and headed toward me. I shrugged. Some visiting dignitary, no doubt...

"Corwin!" he called out. "What are you doing here?"

As he drew nearer, I saw that he was studying me most intently. I gave him the same treatment.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure," I said.

"Aw, come on, Corwin," he said. "You surprised me. Thought

you were off by your Pattern and the '57 Chevy."

I shook my head.

"Not sure what you're talking about," I said.

He narrowed his eyes.

"You're not a Pattern ghost?" he said.

"Merlin told me something about them," I said, "after he effected my release at the Courts. But I don't believe I've ever met one."

I rolled up my left sleeve.

"Cut me. I bleed," I said.

As he studied my arm his gaze appeared more than a little serious. For a moment, I thought he'd actually take me up on it.

"All right," he said then. "Just a nick. For security purposes."

"I still don't know who I'm talking to," I said.

He bowed.

"Sorry. I am Luke of Kashfa, sometimes knows as Rinaldo I, its king. If you are who you say you are, I am your nephew. My dad was your brother Brand."

Studying him, I saw the resemblance. I thrust my arm farther forward.

"Do it," I said.

"You're serious."

"Dead right."

He drew a Bowie knife from his belt then and looked into my eyes. I nodded. He moved to touch my forearm with its tip and nothing happened. That is to say, something happened but it was neither desired nor wholly anticipated.

The point of his blade seemed to sink a half-inch or so into my arm. It kept going then, finally passing all the way through. But no blood came.

He tried again. Nothing.

"Damn!" he said. "I don't understand. If you were a Pattern ghost we'd at least get a flare. But there's not a mark on you."

"May I borrow that blade?" I asked.

"Sure."

He passed it to me. I took it in my hand and studied it. I pushed it into my arm and drew it along for perhaps three-quarters of an inch." Blood oozed.

"I'll be damned!" Luke said. "What's going on?"

"I'd say it's a spell I picked up when I spent a night in the Dancing Mountains recently," I replied.

"Hm," Luke mused. "I've never had the pleasure, but I've heard stories of the place. I don't know any simple ways to break its spells. My room's off toward the front." He gestured southward. "If you'd care to stop by I'll see what I can figure out about it. I studied Chaos magic with dad, and with my mother, Jasra."

I shrugged.

"This is my room right here," I said, "and I've a chicken and a bottle of wine on the way up. Let's do the diagnosis in here, and I'll split the meal with you."

He smiled.

"Best offer I've had all day," he said. "But let me stop back at my room for some tools of the trade."

"All right. I'll walk you back, so I'll know the way in case I need it."

He nodded and turned. We headed up the hall.

Turning the corner, we moved from west to east, passing Flora's apartments and moving in the directions of some of the better visitors' quarters. Luke halted before one room and he reached into his pocket, presumably after the key. Then he halted.

"Uh, Corwin?" he said.

"What?" I responded.

"Those two big cobra-shaped candle holders," he said, gesturing up the hall. "Bronze, I believe."

"Most likely. What of them."

"I thought they were just hall decorations."

"That's what they are."

"The last time I looked at them, they kind of bracketed a small painting or tapestry," he said.

"My recollection, too," I said.

"Well, there seems to be a corridor between them now."

"No, that can't be. There's a proper hallway just a little beyond -", I began.

Then I shut up because then I knew. I began walking toward it.

"What's going on?" Luke asked.

"It's called me," I said. "I got to go and see what it wants."

"What is it?"

"The Hall of Mirrors. It comes and goes. It brings sometimes useful, sometimes ambiguous messages to the one it calls."

"Is it calling us both, or just you?" Luke said.

"Dunno," I replied. "I feel it calling me, as it has in the past. You're welcome to come with. Maybe it has some goodies for you, too."

"You ever hear of two people taking it at once?"

"No, but there's a first time for everything," I said.

Luke nodded slowly.

"What the hell!" he said. "I'm game."

He followed me to the place of the snakes, and we peered up it. Candles flared along its walls, at either hand. And the walls glittered from the countless mirrors which hung upon them. I stepped forward. Luke followed, at my left.

The mirror frames were of every shape imaginable. I walked very slowly, observing the contents of each one. I told Luke to do the same. For several paces, the mirrors seemed simply to be giving back what was before them. Then Luke stiffened and halted, head turning to the left.

"Mom!" he said explosively.

The reflection of an attractive red-haired woman occupied a mirror framed in green-tinged copper in the shape of an Ouroborus serpent.

She smiled.

"So glad you did the right thing, taking the throne," she said.

"You really mean that?" he asked.

"Of course," she replied.

"Thought you might be mad. Thought <u>you</u> wanted it," he said.

"I did once, but those damned Kashfans never appreciated me. I've got the Keep now, though, and I feel like doing a few years' research here—and it's full of sentimental values as well. So as long as Kashfa stays in the family, I wanted you to know I was pleased."

"Why—uh—glad to hear that, Mom. Very glad. I'll hang onto it."

"Do," she said, and vanished.

He turned to me, a small ironic smile flickering across his lips.

"That's one of the rare times in my life when she's approved of something I've done," he said. "Doubtless for all the wrong reasons, but still... How real are these thing? What exactly did we see? Was that a conscious communication on her part? Was—"

"They're real," I said. "I don't know how or why or what part of the other is actually present. They may be stylized, surreal, may even suck you in. But in some way they're really real. That's all I know. Holy cow!"

From the huge gold-framed mirror, ahead and to my right, the grim visage of my father Oberon peered forth. I advanced a pace.

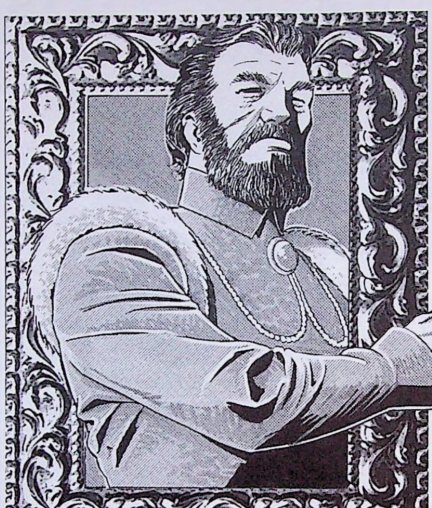
"Corwin," he said. "You were my chosen, but you always had a way of disappointing me."

"That's the breaks," I said.

"True. And one should not speak of you as a child after all these years. You've made your choices. Of some I have been proud. You have been valiant."

"Why, thank you—sir."

"I bid you do something immediately."



"What?"

"Draw your dagger and stab Luke."

I stared.

"No," I said.

"Corwin," Luke said. "It could be something like your proving you're not a Pattern ghost."

"But I don't give a damn whether you're a Pattern ghost," I said. "It's nothing to me."

"Not that," Oberon interjected. "This is of a different order."

"What, then?" I asked.

"Easier to show than to tell," Oberon replied.

Luke shrugged.

"So nick my arm," he said. "Big deal."

"All right. Let's see how the show beats the tell."

I drew a stiletto from my boot sheath. He pulled back his sleeve and extended his arm. I stabbed, lightly.

My blade passed through his arm as if the limb were made of smoke.

"Shit!" Luke said. "It's contagious!"

"No," Oberon responded. "It is a thing of very special scope."

"That is to say?" Luke asked.

"Would you draw your sword, please?"

Luke nodded and drew a familiar-looking golden blade. It emitted a high keening sound, causing all of the candle flames in the vicinity to

flicker. Then I knew it for what it was—my brother Brand's blade, Werewindle.

"Haven't seen that in a long while," I said, as the keening continued.

"Luke, would you cut Corwin with your blade, please?"

Luke raised his eyes, met my gaze. I nodded. He moved the blade, scored my arm with its point. I bled.

"Corwin— If your would...?" Oberon said.

I drew Grayswandir and it, too, ventured into fighting song—as I had heard it do on great battlefields in the past. The two tones joined together into a devastating duet.

"Cut Luke."

Luke nodded and I sliced the back of his hand with Grayswandir. An incision line occurred, reddening immediately. The sounds from our blades rose and fell. I sheathed Grayswandir to shut her up. Luke did the same with Werewindle.

"There's a lesson there somewhere," Luke said. "Damned if I can see what it is, though."

"They're brother and sister weapons, you know, with a certain magic in common. In fact, they've a powerful secret in common," Oberon said. "Tell him, Corwin."

"It's a dangerous secret, sir."

"The time has come for it to be known. You may tell him."

"All right," I said. "Back in the early days of creation the gods had a series of rings their champions used in the stabilization of Shadow."

"I know of them," Luke said. "Merlin wears a Spikard."

"Really," I said. "They each have the power to draw on many sources in many shadows. They're all different."

"So Merlin said."

"Ours were turned into swords, and so they remain."

"Oh?" Luke said. "What do you know?"

"What do you deduce from the fact that they can do you harm when another weapon cannot?"

"Looks as if they're somehow involved in our enchantments," I ventured.

"That's right," Oberon said. "In whatever conflict lies ahead—no

matter what side you are on—you will need exotic protection against the oddball power of someone like Jurt."

"Jurt?" I said.

"Later," Luke told me. "I'll fill you in."

I nodded.

"Just how is this protection to be employed. How do we get back to full permeability?" I asked.

"I will not say," he replied, "but someone along the way here should be able to tell you. And whatever happens, my blessing—which is probably no longer worth much—lies on both of you."

We bowed and said thanks. When we looked up again he was gone.

"Great," I said. "Back for less than an hour and involved in Amber ambiguity."

Luke nodded.

"Chaos and Kashfa seem just as bad, though," he said. "Maybe the state's highest function is to grind out insoluble problems."

I chuckled as we moved on, regarding ourselves in dozens of pools of light. For several paces nothing happened, then a familiar face appeared in a red-framed oval to my left.

"Corwin, what a pleasure," she said.

"Dara!"

"I seems that my unconscious will must be stronger than that of anyone who wishes you ill," she said. "So I get to deliver the best piece of news of all."

"Yes?" I said.

"I see one of you lying pierced by the bade of the other. What joy!"

"I've no intention of killing this guy," I told her.

"Goes both ways," Luke said.

"Ah, but that is the deadly beauty of it," she said. "One of you must be run through by the other for the survivor to regain that element of permeability he has lost."

"Thanks, but I'll find another way," Luke said. "My mom, Jasra, is a pretty good sorceress."

Her laughter sounded like the breaking of one of the mirrors.

"Jasra! She was one of my maids," she said. "She picked up whatever

she knows of the Art by eavesdropping on my work. Not without talent, but she never received full training."

"My dad Brand completed her training," Luke said.

As she studied Luke the merriment when out of her face.

"All right," she said. "I'll level with you, son of Brand. I can't see any way to resolve it other than the way I stated. As I have nothing against you, I hope to see you victorious."

"Thanks," he said, "but I've no intention of fighting my best friend's dad. Someone must be able to lift this thing."

"The tools themselves have drawn you into this," she said. "They will force you to fight. They are stronger than mortal sorcery."

"Thanks for the advice," he said. "Some of it may come in handy," and he winked at her. She blushed, hardly a response I'd have anticipated, then she was gone.

"I don't like the tenor this has acquired," I said.

"Me neither. Can't we just turn around and go back?"

I shook my head.

"It sucks you in," I told him. "Just get everything you can out of it—that's the best advice I ever got on the thing."

We walked on for perhaps ten feet, past some absolutely lovely examples of mirror-making as well as some battered old looking-glasses.

A yellow-lacquered one on Luke's side, embossed with Chinese characters and chipped here and there, froze us in our tracks as the booming voice of my late brother Eric rang out.

"I see your fates," he said with a rumbling laugh, "and I can see the killing ground where you are destined to enact them. It will be interesting, brother. If you hear laughter as you lay dying, it will be mine."

"You always were a great kidder," I said. "By the way, rest in peace. You're a hero, you know."

He studied my face.

"Crazy brother," he said, and he turned his head away and was gone.

"That was Eric, who reigned briefly as king here?" Luke asked.

I nodded. "Crazy brother," I said.

We moved forward and a slim hand emerged from a steel-framed

mirror patterned with roses of rust.

I halted, then turned quickly, somehow knowing even before I saw her who I would behold.

"Deirdre..." I said.

"Corwin," she replied, softly.

"Do you know what's been going on as we walked along?"

She nodded.

"How much is bullshit and how much is true?" I asked.

"I don't know, but I don't think any of the others do either—not for sure."

"Thanks. I'll take all the reassurances I can get. What now?"

"If you will take hold of the other's arm it will make the transport easier."

"What transport?"

"You may not leave this hall on your own motion. You will be taken direct to the killing ground."

"By you, love?"

"I've no choice in the matter."

I nodded. I took hold of Luke's arm.

"What do you think?" I asked him.

"I think we should go," he said, "offering no resistance—and when we find out who's behind this we take him apart with hot irons."

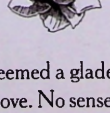
"I like the way you think," I said. "Deirdre, show us the way."

"I've bad feelings about this one, Corwin."

"If, as you said, we've no choice in the matter, what difference does it make? Lead on, lady. Lead on."

She took my hand. The world began to spin around us.

Somebody owned me a chicken and a bottle of wine. I would collect.



I awoke lying in what seemed a glade under a moonlit sky. I kept my eyes half-lidded and I did not move. No sense in giving away my wakefulness.

Very slowly, I moved my eyes. Deirdre was nowhere in sight. My rightside peripheral vision informed me that there might be a bonfire in that direction, some folks seated around it.

I rolled my eyes to the left and got a glimpse of Luke. No one else seemed to be nearby.

"You awake?" I whispered.

"Yeah," he replied.

"No one near," I said, rising, "except maybe for a few around a fire off to the right. We might be able to find a way out and take it—Trumps, Shadowalk—and thus break the ritual. Or we might be trapped."

Luke put a finger into his mouth, removed it, and raised it, as if testing the wind.

"We're caught up in a sequence I think we need," he said.

"To the death?" I said.

"I don't know. But I don't really think we can escape this one," he replied.

He rose to his feet.

"Ain't the fighting, it's the familiarity," I said. "I begrudge knowing you."

"Me, too. What to flip a coin?" he asked.

"Heads, we walk away? Tails we go over and see what the story is?"

"Fine with me." He plunged his hand into a pocket, brought out a quarter.

"Do the honors," I said.

He flipped it. We both dropped to our knees.

"Tails," he sad. "Best two out of three?"

"Naw," I said. "Let's go."

Luke pocketed his quarter and we turned and walked toward the fire.

"Only a dozen people or so. We can take them," Luke said softly.

"They don't look particularly hostile," I said.

"True."

I nodded as we approached and addressed them in Thari.

"Hello," I said. "I'm Corwin of Amber and this is Rinaldo I, King

of Kashfa, also known as Luke. Are we by any chance expected here?"

An older man, who had been seated before it and poking at the fire with a stick, rose to his feet and bowed.

"My name is Reis," he said, "and we are witnesses."

"For whom?" Luke said.

"We do not know their names. There were two and they wore hoods. One, I think, was a woman. —We may offer you food and drink before things begin..."

"Yeah," I said. "I'm out a meal because of this. Feed me."

"Me, too," Luke added, and the man and a couple of his cohorts brought meat, apples, cheese, bread, and cups of red wine.

As we ate, I asked Reis, "Can you tell me how this thing works?"

"Of course," he said. "They told me. When you're finished eating, if you two will move to the other side of the fire the cues will come to you."

I laughed and then I shrugged.

"All right," I said.

Finished dining, I looked at Luke. He smiled.

"If we've go to sing for our supper," Luke said, "Let's give them a 10-minute demonstration and call it a draw."

I nodded.

"Sounds good to me."

We put aside out plates, rose, moved to the fire, and passed behind it.

"Ready?" I said.

"Sure. Why not?"

We drew our weapons, stepped back, and saluted. We both laughed when the music began. Suddenly, I found myself attacking, though I had decided to await the attack and put my first energies into its counter. The movement had been thoughtless, though quite deft and speedy.

"Luke," I said as he parried, "it got away from me. Be careful. There's something odd going on."

"I know," he said as he delivered a formidable attack. "I wasn't planning that."

I parried it and came back even faster. He retreated.

"Not bad," he said, and I felt something loosened in my arm.

Suddenly I was fencing on my own again, voluntarily, with no apparent control but with fear that it might be reasserted at any moment.

Suddenly, I knew that we were fairly free and it scared me. If I weren't sufficiently vicious I might be taken over again. If I were, someone might slip in an unsolicited move that the wrong moment. I grew somewhat afraid.

"Luke, if what's happening to you is similar to what's been happening to me I don't like this show a bit," I told him.

"Me neither," he said.

I glanced back across the fire. A pair of hooded individuals stood among the others. They were not overlarge and there was a certain whiteness within the cowl of the nearer.

"We've more audience," I said.

Luke glanced back. It was only with great difficulty that I halted a cowardly attack as he turned away. When we returned to hard combat, he shook his head.

"Couldn't recognize either of them," he said. "This seems a little more serious than I thought."

"Yeah."

"We can both take quite a beating and recover."

"True."

Our blades rattled on. Occasionally, one of the other of us received a cheer.

"What say we injure each other," Luke said, "then throw ourselves down and wait for their judgment on whatever's been accomplished. If either of them come near enough we take them out just for laughs."

"Okay," I said. "If you can expose your left shoulder a bit I'm willing to take a midline cut. Let's give them lots of gore before we flop, though. Head and forearm cuts. Anything easy."

"Okay. And 'simultaneity' is the word."

So we fought. I stood off a bit, going faster and faster. Why not? It was kind of a game.

Suddenly, my body executed a move I had not ordered it to. Luke's eyes widened as the blood spurted and Grayswandir passed entirely through his shoulder. Moments later, Werewindle pierced my vitals.

"Sorry," Luke said. "Listen, Corwin. If you live and I don't you'd better know that there's too much crazy stuff involving mirrors going on around the castle. The night before you came back Flora and I fought a creature that came out of a mirror. And there's an odd sorcerer involved—has a crush on Flora. Nobody knows his name. Has something to do with Chaos, though, I'd judge. Could it be that for the first time Amber is starting to reflect Shadow, rather than the other way around?"

"Hello," said a familiar voice. "The deed is done."

"Indeed," said another.

It was the two cowled figures who had spoken. One was Fiona, the other Mandor.

"However it be resolved, good night sweet prince," said Fiona.

I tried to rise. So did Luke. Tried also to raise my blade. Could not. Again, the world grew dim, and this time I was leaking precious bodily fluids.

"I'm going to live—and come after you," I said.

"Corwin," I heard her say faintly. "We are not as culpable as you may think. This was—"

"—all for my own good, I'll bet," I muttered before the world went dark, growling with the realization that I hadn't gotten to use my death curse. One of these days...

I woke up in the dispensary in Amber, Luke in the next bed. We both had IVs dripping into us.

"You're going to live," Flora said, lowering my wrist from taking my pulse. "Care to tell me your story now?"

"They just found us in the hall?" Luke asked. "The Hall of Mirrors was nowhere in sight?"

"That's right."

"I don't want to mention any names yet," I said.

"Corwin," Luke said. "Did the Hall of Mirrors show up a lot when you were a kid?"

"No," I said.

"Hardly ever, when I was growing up either," Flora said. "It's only in recent years that it's become this active. Almost as if the place were waking up."

"The place?" Luke said.

"Almost as if there's another player in the game," she responded.

"Who?" I demanded, causing a pain in my gut.

"Why, the castle itself, of course," she said.

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ERIC: BLACK ROAD BATTLE

by Genevieve Cogman

I feel my life drain slowly from my body,
My blood resounds like thunder in my head:
Time seems to stop and start between each heartbeat,
My siblings stand like statues round my bed:
Concerned no more with honesty or lying,
But gathered here this hour to watch my dying.

The Jewel of Judgement pulses with my heartbeat,
Its light spills out like blood across my hand:
I hear the cries and gunfire of the battle,
Death of the enemies on Amber's land:
But little reaches now where I am lying,
Only a bitter wailing and faint crying.

Corwin, my brother, long have you disdained me,
But now our enmity is at an end:
I hear your guns reecho in the distance,
My enemy returned to stand my friend.
Our bitter hate no longer now repels us:
It is our love for Amber that compels us.

Were I to speak the truth, you'd not believe me,
Say that I took your sight to save your life:
Now at my passing hour, it almost grieves me
That we have wasted so much time in strife:
Those petty wars which have our lives comprised
So nearly lost us what we both most prized.

By blood and power, by life which ebbs so swiftly,
I lay my dying curse on Amber's foes:
My final gift: I leave the Jewel of Judgement
To you, my brother of the silver rose.
The darkness rises round me as I lie here:
Only the crimson twilight as I die here.

BLACK ROAD'S LAMENT

By Cliff Winnig
Illustrated by Michael Kucharski

A cold wind bore us along a dark strip of ocean, inky and serpentine, that wound its way through the green seas in this part of Shadow. I could hear the cries of wyverns above me, calling nervously to one another. They nested high in the rigging of the cityship's sails and could see quite clearly what lay ahead.

I ignored them, concentrating on my task. Already, a distant hiss that would soon become a roar had begun, rising in volume as we sailed closer to the edge of the world. I conjured forth the image of the Logrus. As its eidolon appeared before me, I spread my arms wide, extending them into the ever-shifting maze, sending tendrils from the maze both fore and aft. Some tendrils felt their way back along the jet-black water—the local manifestation of the Black Road—and anchored themselves to the ocean floor. Others felt forward through the waterfall at the ocean's edge, across the windy abyss beyond, to the next continent-sized floating island. *There.* Unlike our current island, the next one consisted mainly of solid land, bisected by a single river that had become for much of its length a part of the Black Road. I latched onto that firmament, creating a road of my own within the greater Road.

"Do you have it, Lord Mordred?" asked Captain Quill from my right. He made a nervous clucking sound with his albatrosslike beak.

"Let him concentrate!" hissed my lieutenant, Zabath Half-Demon, who stood at my left. She wore her demon aspect that day, deep-blue horns and scales of ash gray.

I severed the tendrils from the Logrus eidolon, leaving instructions for them to remain in place. I inspected my work through the eidolon's lens and saw that it was good. Though many a ship out of Chaos could simply sail across the empty parts of the Black Road, a ship this huge could not maintain enough buoyancy on the Road alone. Without my shoring up that part of the Road, it would sink slowly into the depths.

I turned to the feathered lizard, the captain-mayor of the Cityship *The Protean Sprawl*. "We shan't sink, Captain Quill. I've finished the reinforcements. Now I'll rest for awhile. You can find me below, if need be. Don't disturb me with trivialities." He did not look terribly reassured, but he'd do his duty and sail off the edge of the world, as I'd instructed him. On the next floating island, we'd find Londinium, the port city where the Road left the river and became a road. There, my troops would disembark. Captain Quill would not have to travel all the way to Amber, merely drop us off further along the Road.

I turned to Zabath. "Follow," I said.

We walked across the deck towards the parapets of the forecastle. Vast rune-painted sails billowed above us—black, red, and gold in the colors of House Yyvrael. Behind, the roar of the approaching oceanwide waterfall grew steadily louder.

We entered the forecastle and descended a spiraling stair. As we walked, I gave Zabath instructions. "Prepare to depart *The Protean Sprawl* in a few hours. It's time for the cavalry troops to retrieve and saddle up their wyverns, and the infantry should assemble abovedeck in six hours' time." When we reached my quarters, she bowed and left to carry out my orders.

Deep inside the ship, I took my rest. Captain Quill had wondered aloud why I'd wanted my lodging there rather than a penthouse cabin atop some tower or other abovedeck. I'd told him that I liked to hear the sound of the ocean moving below.

I woke to waves crashing against the hull. The waterfall at the world's end had grown deafening, but that had been a steady sound, one I'd easily slept through. These waves broke on the cityship's stern, speaking insistently in my father's voice. I uttered a minor spell, and the waterfall noise receded from my consciousness, allowing me to make out Father's words.

"Mordred!" said the waves. "Contact your brother. He's had

difficulties and will try to meet you at Londinium." I could picture Father speaking the words from his marble throne in the Ways of Yyvrael, a spider in his web. This far out into Shadow the Trumps became unreliable, so he'd used a property of the Black Road to send the message.

"Yes, Father," I whispered, using the same property to send my voice back along the Road to Chaos.

I rose and rummaged through my already-packed saddlebags for my Trump deck. Finding it, I removed my brother's Trump and concentrated on his image, feeling the card grow cold. Curig's visage began to move, to shift. His flame-red hair, loose and free in the portrait, lay covered by his great helm. His ruby eyes and slender face were all but hidden as well. The perpetual cynical chuckle captured by the artist had become a grimace. A long scratch, as from a rapier, appeared on his chin, smoldering.

"Brother!" Curig breathed heavily. He rode through a forest of hanging vines. The gasbag plants from which they trailed floated several feet above his head. Behind him galloped a half-dozen other humanformed knights of Chaos, thorny vines whipping at their faces, catching on points of their armor. Several had already been covered by dozens of severed strands. The plants screamed as their vines tore off, forming a continuous cacophony in the background.

"Gaeron is dead," Curig said, using his sword to slice through clusters of vines as he spoke. "Bleys wouldn't negotiate. The talks were but a ruse, to lure us here in humanform."

One of his men gave a piteous cry as, snagged by a score of vines, he was lifted bodily from his horse and yanked up into the floating plant's maw.

"Shall I pull you through?" I asked.

"No, I think we've gotten away. I'll meet you in Londinium."

A hail of arrows rained down on the knights then, killing two more of them. One pierced Curig's chainmail above the knee. His ceremonial armor had not been made for actual combat.

"On second thought, perhaps you should," he said. "But I'd like to save my horse, and you're indoors."

"Bide," I said, waving my hand above the card to break the contact. I threw on a robe and Logrus'd myself to an open area of the deck, a training

ground for the cityship's compliment of marine soldiers.

There, I quickly reestablished contact. Curig and his three remaining knights rode through, along with a score of arrows that thunked into the deck all around them.

Just then, the ship lurched as it sailed into the starry void between floating islands. My Logrus tendrils held, and we began our crossing.

Though tense, the meeting was informal, so I wore my humanform: long black hair, Van Dyke beard, crimson eyes, pale skin. In this shape, I looked a lot like my older brother.

The cityship's surgeon had bound Curig's wounds and used some Logrus techniques to speed the healing, but still my brother appeared haggard. He sat across the table from me, Zabath Half-Demon and Captain Quill to either side. The round room in which we sat topped the highest tower of the captain-mayor's mansion; its windows showed the view in all directions.

Currently, we could see the pale blue sky above and the starry void below. We sailed along a strip of total blackness in that void. Far ahead and far behind, floating islands drifted near the horizon.

"Bleys proved stubborn," said Curig. "Though he met us at the agreed-upon time, when we arrived, he refused to tell us about his current plans, or what Fiona and Brand were doing. Gaeron believed that we'd been right about both of them. Fiona, it seems, has been residing in or near Amber, and Brand has been imprisoned, probably by Bleys, Fiona, or both. Gaeron spoke with King Swayvill by Trump, and His Majesty ordered him to obtain Brand's location if possible."

"What of Baron Khargbane's death?" hissed Captain Quill impatiently.

"Let him get to it in his time," said Zabath. Mordred suspected she wanted more than anyone else to know all the details. Gaeron, Baron Khargbane had been her half-uncle.

"Gaeron prolonged the talks, trying to draw Bleys out about Brand's location," said Curig. "Bleys must have become suspicious of his new goal, or perhaps he decided he wouldn't get any more information from us. I suspect he meant to kill us all along, luring us to that remote shadow with the promise of negotiations. He must have hidden his men in one of the nearby caves. Tall, red-skinned folk. When they burst into the tent, we all turned towards the entrance. That's when Bleys leapt up and cut Gaeron down, before we could react."

"I shall avenge him," Zabath said quietly.

"Moving quickly, I fought past his men and rejoined my own men outside. Some of my knights formed a ring around the rest of us, so that we could mount and ride away. Bleys had hundreds of soldiers to our dozens, but those who stayed behind bought us enough time."

He looked at me. "When we'd ridden a few miles, I Trumped our father. Unfortunately, I couldn't establish a strong enough connection to ride through to Chaos. I did manage to tell him what had happened. A few minutes later, you called."

I nodded. "Father contacted me via the Black Road."

"Do you think Bleys might still be in the area?" asked Quill, peering nervously through the windows. His feathered head turned nearly a full

360 degrees.

"No," said Curig. "The meeting took place a fair distance from here, in a landlocked shadow."

Captain Quill relaxed a bit at that news.

"What are your orders?" Curig asked me.

"I am leading a score of silver knights, three legions of infantry, and two legions of cavalry—one horse, one wyvern—to fight King Eric's troops in Amber."

"My mission has failed," said Curig. "I'd like to accompany you, if you'll have me."

I smiled. "Of course." I breathed an inner sigh of relief. Though only a few years my elder, Curig could have asked to take command of my House Yyvrael troops, and I would have had to acquiesce. He knew this to be my first real command, though, and he was letting me keep it.

Captain Quill stood up, knocking over his chair. "What's that?" he squawked.

"What's what?" demanded Zabath.

Then we all felt it. A shaking of the cityship, a minute swaying. All around us, the sails went slack. Though insubstantial here, the Black Road began to vibrate. I summoned the Sign of Chaos. Something was happening, perhaps had already happened, at the Amber end. I could see that Curig had summoned his own image of the Logrus.

Far in the distance, where the Road became a river, then a road, it lay thrashing, but not the way a Logrus tendril moves. More as if it were in pain. And the thrashing was coming closer.

"Brace yourselves!" I shouted.

A wave, a tsunami of force struck the cityship. Windows shattered. Wyverns screeched. All around us I heard a weeping sound, a lament that came from the Black Road itself. The Road wept, and we sank down, down, down into its grief, sails slack, deck tilting.

Captain Quill ran to one shattered window, then another. He looked behind us to the ocean island and ahead to the river island. Both lay miles away. "We'll never make landfall before she sinks," he moaned. He ran to a brass cone that emerged from a tube running down into the floor.

With surprising grace, he composed himself, so that when he spoke

his voice held the tone of steadfast authority. "This is Captain Quill. *The Protean Sprawl* is sinking. All hands abandon ship. I repeat, all hands abandon ship."

A wailing rose up from the various towers, an alarm triggered by his announcement. The sound blended with the Black Road's lament and the noise of splintering timbers. Some of the towers to the fore had begun to topple.

"Quickly!" hissed Zabath. She dashed down the spiraling stairs, racing to escape before our tower too crashed into the deck.

I reached out and plucked her up with a Logrus tendril. Curig grabbed Quill, and we pulled the four of us to the open area where I'd brought Curig through.

I thought of Marchudd, my coal-black warhorse, still penned belowdeck. Sending forth more tendrils, I brought him to me, along with his saddle and, from my own quarters, his saddlebags.

The Black Road's lament rose in pitch, then died away suddenly, leaving only the myriad sounds of alarm coming from all quarters of the cityship.

A moment later, I heard words, spoken the same way Father had spoken to me, reverberating along the Black Road. Only these words were spoken by someone I'd never met, someone I knew instinctively to be King Eric of Amber. He uttered a curse, one that fell upon us like a vast wall of stone, crumbling to the ground, crushing all beneath its massive blocks. The curse smashed against my Sign, and I screamed. My head felt as if it had caught fire. I fainted to the ever-more-slanting deck.

I woke to Zabath standing over me, an expression of concern on her gray, scaly face. The ground below me consisted of cobblestones and black, wavy grass that gently caressed me. I lay on the Road, but no longer on the deck of *The Protean Sprawl*. They'd moved me to a ruined plaza within the river delta on the far island.

My head ached as if I'd drunk an entire case of Old Chaos Rot.

Worse, I felt Eric's curse, like a disease that had taken root in my soul.

Zabath helped me rise. "After Curig and you collapsed, we mustered the surviving troops and evacuated," she said. "Wyverns and horses took most of the survivors, the rest fled on foot. Even the infantry managed to cross the void by staying on the Road."

I nodded wearily. "Did we manage to save any coffee?"

She grinned. "A little. I'll get you a mug."

A little to my left, Curig sat rubbing his own head. We'd both had the Sign up when the curse had hit.

I stood in awe of the power that could be so great, even in death. In awe, and in anger. How dare that upstart king lay such a curse upon the Courts of Chaos! I knew that it must have reached all the way home by now, and I wondered what havoc it had wrought. Even in wartime, such devastation could not be justified!

But then, a quiet voice in my head whispered, isn't the power itself its own justification? Hadn't Corwin's own curse made our way into Amber that much easier, opening in months the path that would have taken years to form had it been shaped solely by Martin's blood on the primal Pattern?

Such power in words, in death. I filed the thought away for further contemplation. I'd spent much of my youth learning the art of necromancy, personally trained by my father, the greatest necromancer in all of Chaos. Though death always released great energies, nothing of the magnitude I had experienced could be produced by killing even the most powerful Rim Lords of Chaos. It had to be the Pattern itself supplying the raw power behind Eric's death curse. Perhaps, I considered, with further research the Logrus could be made to serve a similar function.

Zabath returned with a metal mug of coffee, and I drank gratefully.

"Bring me Marchudd," I told her. "I'll address the company." She did this thing, and presently I sat upon my warhorse giving a rousing speech about honor and country and bravery in the face of adversity. I told them that King Eric lay dead, and that total victory must therefore come soon.

My words were not well-received. The feeling of dread that weighed on my heart clearly affected everyone. Moreover, the survivors among Quill's crew had lost their home. For many of them, it had been their family's home for untold generations. They would have to return to Chaos on other

transports, as refugees from nothing more substantial than the words of Eric's curse.

Afterwards, Curig, Zabath, and I organized our troops and moved out, bidding farewell to sad Quill and his sailors. Curig seemed to have been hit worse than I had. He could ride, but he swayed drunkenly in his saddle as we followed the river towards distant Londinium. The route by land would be longer and harder than sailing down the river Road itself.

That day, the attacks began. Creatures native to this shadow harassed our flanks. At first, they were merely a nuisance, but by the day's end they'd become a definite hazard. The weather conspired with these attacks, as a cold rain beat down upon us for hours. The downpour proved resistant to all sorcerous attempts to quell it.

By the time we camped for the night, I'd lost dozens of troops. It rained too hard to build campfires, so everyone shifted to demonform to stave off the cold.

My tent barely stood against gale-force winds that came up with nightfall. Within its fluttering walls, I pulled out my Trump of Father.

It was nearing the end of a long, frustrating night. On the table beside me lay all the Trumps I had for the Chaos generals already in Amber. Earlier in the evening, Curig and I had tried to contact each of them. We'd failed, leaving us to conclude that they'd died. Beside their Trumps lay a reading consisting mostly of swords and ending with my Trump of the Courts, reversed.

I concentrated on Father's image. Ever so slowly, it came to life. Father's coal-black hair danced wildly in the wind. His black-and-gold cloak billowed behind him. It was clasped with the crowned Logrus that is the symbol of House Yyvrael. He stood upon a high balcony of the Ways of Yyvrael, the Rimwall visible in the distance. Against that backdrop, his slender form seemed vulnerable, until one looked into his gaunt face, his sunken eyes of steel. His slight frame held more concentrated power than most Lords of Chaos, and many of his fellow Rim Lords as well.

"Where are you, Mordred? What has befallen *The Protean Sprawl*?" His powerful voice echoed like chasms, thick with half-heard undertones, as though he spoke from within a huge mausoleum.

"The cityship itself has fallen," I said. I told him what had happened

when Eric's blood curse had struck us upon the Black Road. He took the news stoically. I asked if he'd heard from any of the generals at the front.

He shook his head grimly. "We believe they lie dead. Suhuy thinks that firearms have somehow been fashioned that work in Amber, and that Prince Corwin himself employed them against us."

My mind reeled at the news. First Bleys and Fiona, who had come to us seeking allies, and now Corwin, who had helped open the way. Was all Amber united against us now?

Another part of my mind marveled at Suhuy's power, his control. He must have sent a Logrus lens all the way across Shadow, from Chaos to Amber, in order to view events in such detail.

"All is not lost," my father said. "Dara has returned to Chaos this very hour and speaks now with King Swayvill. She has assailed the Pattern, Mordred, and survived."

The news tugged my heart in two directions. I rejoiced that at least part of our plan had succeeded. Merlin might well be able to rule Amber in Swayvill's name, acceptable because his bloodline could be proven. But now a Lady of Chaos commanded that very power that had given life to Eric's death curse. It seemed an abomination.

I realized that my father awaited some sort of response. "I am glad she survived," I said. "What should I do now?"

"Continue following the Road, at least until Suhuy's findings can be confirmed, but remain cautious. I suspect Dara's debriefing will make things clearer. I'll contact you if your orders change."

"Very well, Father," I said, closing the contact. I poked my head out into the rain and told one of the miserable soldiers standing guard to fetch Curig and Zabath. When they arrived, I filled them in on what Father had said.

Curig seemed less surprised than I'd been about Suhuy's accomplishment. Zabath hadn't traversed the Logrus, so she couldn't have understood what vast skill his act had required.

A gust of wind blew open the tent flaps, scattering generals and cards from my reading. A moment later, a soldier ran in.

"M'lords!" he said. "We're under attack!"

Behind him, a burst of flame originating high above shot down on

the camp, momentarily blinding us. In its aftermath, one of the tents became an inferno. Troops ran everywhere as the alarm sounded.

I stood, belting on Gwaedflaidd, my blood-red broadsword. Curig drew his own blade, the Sword of the Writhing Runes. Both swords incorporated the power of the Logrus. Mine exsanguinated its victims—useful against shapeshifters with the blood of Chaos, but not so useful against dragons. His own blade, forged from the same crimson metal as Gwaedflaidd, had been inscribed with golden runes that would likely prove more helpful.

We ran outside. Great bursts of flame rained down, igniting more tents, equipment, and people. With each such exhalation, I caught a glimpse of the dragon, huge and black, hovering above. Men, horses, and wyverns floated upwards into the night sky, for this was one of the shadows where the dead so rise.

We corralled some riderless wyverns and took off to engage the beast. Both Curig and I had demonforms sporting four arms. In my right hands, I held Gwaedflaidd and my battle horn, which I sounded as I rose to meet the dragon. In my left arms, I carried a barbed spear that I hoped could penetrate the creature's scaled hide. I adjusted my eyes to see it more clearly in the night sky.

Curig reached it first, darting under a cone of fiery breath and slicing up into its belly. The writhing runes for which his sword was named twisted and shook. Gouts of burning blood rained down, but he darted out of the way. Where he'd struck, the dragon's hide began to shift, the wound's ragged edges warping into painfully twisted shapes. The dragon bellowed and coiled around itself, reversing its direction to give chase.

I came at its flank, hacking at the wound, widening it. Burning blood sprayed everywhere, some of it splattering across my armor, where it sizzled. My wyvern screeched, for a little blood had struck its hide. I directed it upwards, preparing for another pass.

Zabath attacked from the other side, several cavalrymen behind her. The dragon looked briefly in their direction, treating them to a gust of flame. Several rose burning; the rest were forced to scatter.

Curig took advantage of its momentary distraction. Laughing, he lanced one of its eyes with his sword, causing spasms of disfiguring changes

across the right side of the dragon's face. It screamed, blowing flame everywhere, but he reined in his wyvern, expertly darting back out of the way.

I dove towards its head from the other side and threw my spear straight into its remaining eye. Coiling, writhing, it thrashed in midair, snapping blindly at nothing.

It could only have been incredibly bad luck, what happened next. Bad luck, or the blood curse of Eric.

The dragon started rolling over and over, on a course that would smash it into the ground. But a sudden updraft lifted it, and a side wind stabilized it for a moment. At the same time, wind struck Curig's wyvern so violently that it called out.

The dragon lunged towards the sound and snapped its jaws, cutting my brother in two.

My battle cry was heard by all my remaining forces, I later learned. I flew towards the dragon's head, slicing it off with a two-handed blow that numbed both my upper arms. I barely held onto Gwaedflaidd. The head spun away, floating up into the predawn sky, and the body slammed into a hillside below.

Holding the reins with my lower hands, I flew upwards, following the two halves of Curig's body, desperate to recover them, though the rational part of my mind knew that it was totally hopeless. Even Father's necromancy couldn't have restored him after being thus killed.

But now bodies choked the sky. I flew past Marchudd's burned and twisted corpse. In the distance, I caught a glimpse of the Sword of the Writhing Runes, gold twisting on crimson, as it caught the first morning light. The top half of Curig held onto it still.

A gust of wind blew the body of a wyvern into me, and I lost control of my own mount. By the time I stabilized my flight, Curig's body had disappeared from sight.

In the days that followed, Suhuy's intelligence was confirmed, and I was called back to Chaos. But all I could think, all I could tell Father, was that Curig had gone beyond my reach. Forever.

Cliff Winnig:

Cliff Winnig has been playing Mordred with varying degrees of regularity on AmberMUSH since late 1992. AmberMUSH has been a huge, sprawling online Amber campaign for a little bit longer than that. The first Amber-themed MUSH (Multi-User Shared Hallucination), it still runs twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The Ways of Yyvrael can be found on the MUSH within the Courts of Chaos. Curious Shadow folk can find out more about AmberMUSH at ambermush.org and more about the Courts at inthecourts.com. "Black Road's Lament" takes place before the AmberMUSH game start, telling what a young Mordred experienced during the Patternfall War. Cliff created an earlier, more transient version of Mordred for a brief campaign GMed by Ron Levy; this story contains an echo of that earlier character's experiences, but as part of the AmberMUSH milieu. In addition to writing fiction, Cliff spends time studying North Indian classical music with Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, specifically playing the sitar.

GABRIELLE

By Simone Cooper
Illustrated by Melissa Gay

Game events since the end of the first Ezekiel piece in *Amberzine VII*: Since escaping Shadow Arena where he had been fostered as a child, Ezekiel, shape-shifting son of Random, bummed around in Shadow with his "demonic" companion, Strike, during which time little things like the Corwin chronicles and the Patternfall War occurred. Strike and Zeke found and befriended Zeke's younger brother, Martin, who introduced them to the Courts of Chaos and to other estranged children of Amber, notably Merlin. Eventually Martin also persuaded Zeke to visit Amber, saying Random had changed.

Though there was tension between them, Ezekiel was recognized by Random and placed first in the succession until such time as his union with Vialle should bear a legitimate heir.

Surprising no one more than himself, Zeke actually became a fine prince and an effective ambassador. He enjoyed foreign affairs and the politics side of being a member of the royal family. Strike became a somewhat popular court figure in her own right. Her shape-shifting form settled mostly into a slightly shorter version of Zeke himself; she added a beard when Zeke's cousins complained it was difficult to tell them apart.

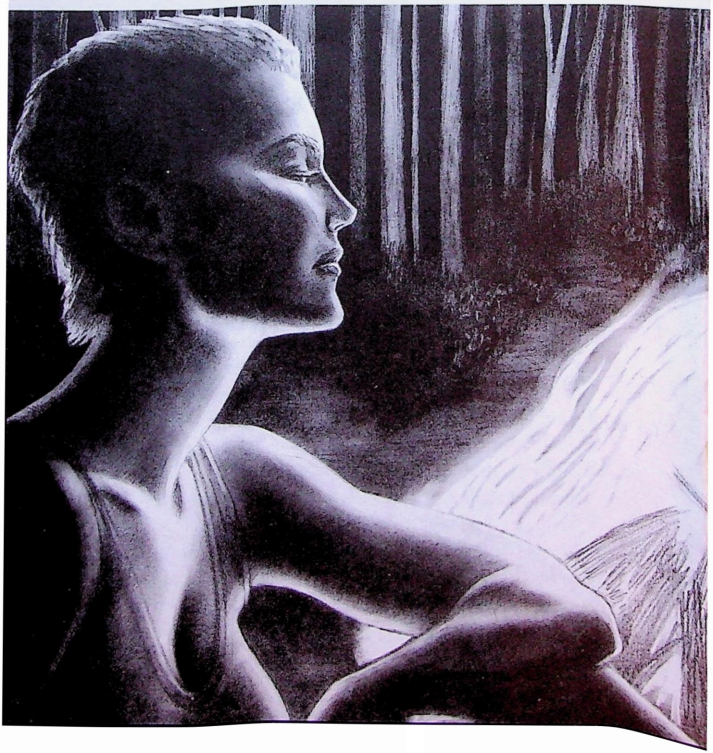
So life went along until the Jewel of Judgment, triggered by the Serpent, began to attack and slowly absorb any Amberite attuned to it. Corwin was lost first. Then Bleys and Fiona started slipping. Finally Random started going mad. Fiona accused Zeke of making a patricidal play for the throne and mind-raped him to (dis)prove it. While all this was

going on, Zeke and his cousins stumbled upon a Shadow full of Oberon's forgotten siblings, "Greek" gods who were just a little peeved to have been trapped by their brother for five millennia. The events in the piece below take place in the middle of all this, in the campaign that came to be called *Judgment Day*.

Gabrielle I

Some stories should not have sequels.

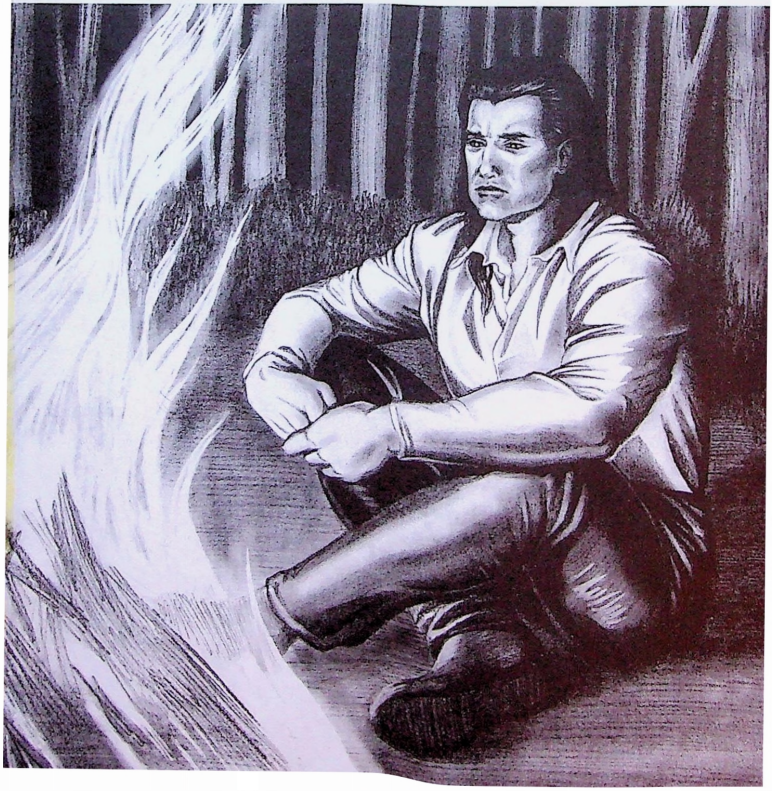
I'd dealt with all this. I'd come to understand it, put it to rest. I knew



my father. Most amazingly, I thought I knew myself. But Gabrielle came back.

She is here, in front of me. If I raise my eyes I'll see her in profile sitting across the campfire. I don't, because overlaying my vision would be the sight of her as I'd seen her last: dust streaking her right cheek, her delicate jaw gripped by my hand, the odd angle of her head as she fell. I once made the decision that her death was acceptable, and I can't use the happy accident of her survival to erase it.

Since Bleys had told me of her escape from Arena, I'd known our paths would cross. Still, I wasn't prepared.



When we met, finally, it was by chance. Old John, Strike and I had been walking into Greece through Shadow. I had my head down, determined to move along and finish this business for Corwin and for Random. This was about three hours ago.

Strike was with me, John a bit ahead of us, when Strike's mind-voice cut into my concentration. *Zeke.*

I stopped. Before she told me, I knew.

Zeke. It's her.

I risked a sidelong glance at Strike, who had turned slowly to stare behind me. Long seconds passed. My chest constricted. Pain lanced my left arm. My body sang with adrenaline.

When I turned I still thought she might not be there. Empty hope. Gabrielle stood in the path behind us, brindled by the sun. Feet apart, braced as if for battle, she wore her armor from Arena in a liquid silver sheath over her body and down her arms. Her red hair was still short as I remembered. Every detail of her was the same. Except the hand, of course—I felt my eyes drawn there, and frowned in surprise to see it healed and whole.

I heard Old John calling to me. I suppose Strike motioned to him or something, because he didn't shoot anyone.

"Zeke," Gabrielle acknowledged. Her voice was unchanged; that syllable could have been my name in love or in the Arena on any of a hundred nights.

I swallowed and nodded like an automaton, "Gabrielle."

Gabrielle followed my gaze to the end of her arm and smiled wickedly. "Ah. Yes. You remember." The silver glove fell away and the hand went with it. With the stump, she gestured towards her armor. "Strike makes it for me, the hand. I don't even think about it any more."

"*What* did you say?"

"I said, 'Strike makes it for me—'"

"Why do you call your armor…?"

"Strike? That's her name. She told me."

Strike was in my mind again. *Leave it for now, Zeke,* she said, but her voice was full of wonder.

I shook my head. "Um. Why are you here?"

"To find Corwin, same as you. Except Bleys sent me."

"Okay." Of course, it wasn't okay. Random was nearer gone than ever; the treaty with Greece was about to get a good shaking; and Amber didn't have anything left with which to fight if it came to war. And I could drop it all in a second to have one moment of trust with Gabrielle. "I... I should let you know... I did love you."

"As I did, you. But revenge would have been better." She shrugged. "I went for it."

"That's it?"

"Your love didn't stop you from breaking my neck."

"I... wanted to survive. I'm sorry." I thought I was sorry. I had been, though it didn't seem as certain as it had yesterday.

"How could you be? I would have killed you." Gabrielle replied lightly. Her matter-of-fact tone hypnotized me. "But I hope to have a life in Amber, now, and Arena is behind me, and what I have been asked to do is very important to... people I care about. So I can let this lie if you can."

I nodded dumbly.

There was no truth in it, of course. I had loved her more than enough, too much. It was a long time after we parted before I took any pleasure in what I'd bought by killing her—my own life seemed too expensive. I was sorry then, but in hindsight I know that being sorry would have meant suicide. And "let it lie?" Impossible.

She's turned back, and I feel frozen in place like Lot's wife. I am made of salt, bitter and electric, hoping for rain.

"Good. Shall we proceed?" Gabrielle answered her own question by walking towards me, closer, closer, and on past. Old John caught my eye. His mouth hung open. I don't think I'd ever seen him surprised before. The three of us followed her up and over the bridge, across into Shadow Greece to meet whatever reception lay ahead.

In a hoarse whisper Old John asked me, "What the hell are you thinking about?"

"I don't know. Bleys sent her." I remembered the malign influence of the Jewel on him, on all of us, and shuddered.

Yet somehow we had gotten from there to here, our campsite provided by the Grecian soldiers set to guard the Shadow entrance. They'd assured

us they would send a message to Apollo that we'd arrived to see him on Amber's business.

Now, another hour goes by with me trying to blind myself, staring at the flames of the campfire. I hear Gabrielle stand and retire to the tent John provided. I remain seated; maybe I intend to sit here till morning. I'm not sure.

Gruffly, some time later, Old John speaks. "Zeke, are you gonna get some sleep, or what? I don't want you on this if you're going to be a liability tomorrow." I suppose what he might mean is, "I'm worried about you." These are the first words beyond non-committal grunts he's spoken since we encountered Gabrielle.

I nod, still trying to fathom the random motion of the fire. "Sometime."

He goes back to grunting. I think he says I shouldn't do anything stupid, which makes me laugh.

The fire finally goes out. Around me the damp Grecian night fills with insect sounds. When my eyes adjust, I stand, staggering a bit. My legs are stiff, the muscles sore like after a hard workout. I walk towards Gabrielle's tent, making no effort to be quiet. I don't want her to think I'm trying to sneak up on her.

I check over my shoulder for Strike. She's off across the encampment. In the moon's light I can see her sitting with Gabrielle's armor where they've been talking since shortly after they met, she in my form, Gabrielle's in hers. They are silvered by the moonlight. She's paying no attention to me for the moment, which feels strange. I am used to the constant awareness of Strike's voice.

I hesitate another second, then lift the flap of the tent. Gabrielle has had plenty of time; she is awake, though still lying in her sleeping bag. Her left hand rests on the pommel of a fine curved sword. I have a start of recognition—the blade is Werewindle, which I last saw in Bleys's scabbard. I am too tired, suddenly, to worry about how she came to have it.

The silence is a muffling weight. The sound of my voice is startling. "Gabrielle. There is something I have to say."

She turns slightly, acknowledging.

"What I said to you this afternoon about deciding I wanted to survive

more than I loved you—it wasn't true."

From her this earns a sarcastic laugh. "You're telling me you loved me more than life itself? Please."

"I'm trying to say that for a long time I thought I had made the wrong decision. It took me a long time…"

"Okay, you've said it."

I nod abruptly and step back and let the tent flap fall, cutting off my view of Gabrielle's pale arm and the dim, silver-blue light radiating from her blade. Walking away I realize at least one thing: she was afraid I was going to say something else.

Towards dawn I make the effort to lie down. From the next bedroll Old John's steady breathing doesn't fool me. He's been awake, or near enough to get that way fast, all night. Random is his friend. I am Random's son.

An hour later, when the encampment stirs, I still don't know what I'm hoping to learn or trying to prove. To have something to do, I get up and check on the state of our request with the Greek commander here, a young lieutenant. He speaks to me in the slouchy, eyes-adrift manner of someone who has been ordered to forget I was his enemy. He repeats that my request for an audience with Apollo had been sent on with a runner. We should expect an escort sometime today.

I thank him, but find myself talking to the side of the lieutenant's face, so cut it short. I wander back to our tents. On the way I try to evaluate the soldiers going about their business: first line of defense between this mythic Shadow and anyone approaching through the Gate at the bridge. They look relaxed and guardedly happy; the treaty between our realms is just old enough that they're starting to believe it. Personally I get the mix of reactions I expect: some pointedly ignore me; others greet me with a nod and a small smile; all of them have something to say to one another when I've passed.

It is a truism of diplomacy that the more two sides work towards the same resolution, the farther apart they grow. This was truer of Amber's struggle towards a treaty with Oberon's lost siblings, here in Greece, than in any historical case I'd studied preparing for my role as negotiator. They styled themselves as gods, the gods that are reflected as the Greek gods of

Shadow; we, the gods of Amber's many-fingered realms. Still, the pride and hubris that entered into our "little war" were as human as the basest squabble for a child's toy.

Both sides wanted this peace. Neither could afford open warfare, and neither could do without the other's help in the bigger battle that is still on our horizon: the hostile new shape of Shadow that Chaos hopes to implement through the Serpent's hold upon the Jewel.

Still, the more we offered Oberon's brothers and sisters, the less they trusted our motives; the more truth we gave them, the less they believed. It had come to this: after thousands of lives lost on both sides, after the gods we all thought ourselves to be had discovered mortality, after everyone had revealed that they were, in fact, shitty enough to use their weapons... in the middle of that embarrassing moment when everyone's pants were down, Apollo and I found, in mutual terror, a narrow opening for peace.

It came none too soon, not just because of what steps we might have taken next, but also because there was no place left to go. The argument that turned Apollo, the thing I sensed he'd understand, was that Amber had little to lose; she was the wolverine in her hole, with only pride and ferocity left to her. The Jewel, the weapon these "Greeks" feared, was only half in our control. Judgment was coming, indeed, and coming first for those closest to it: Corwin, his son Merlin, Fiona, Bleys. My father, Amber's king.

That is why the treaty bears the name Ezekiel instead of Random.

And Hades, damn him. What kind of psychopath styles himself god over hell, anyway? A psychopath for whom might makes right; one whose actions tore our attempts at peace down a dozen times. And now that Apollo and I achieved it around him? He makes one last stab, one very personal stab at Amber that he knows cannot be ignored.

He has Corwin's body, Corwin's Trumps, and Corwin's blade.

And Apollo does nothing? Watching the expressions on the faces of the Greek soldiers here, I toy with the possibility that Apollo doesn't even know. It only infuriates me further. I'm here, heading for Olympus to deal with this in person, when I should be making my way with my cousins to Chaos and some chance at salvation for Random and Amber.

By the time I'd left on this mission, my father didn't even know his

own name. He had been in and out of consciousness and sensibility even as the first messengers of the peace were spreading the word through Shadow. Corwin's fate was the example of where Random will end if we don't solve this problem: comatose, insensate, sinking farther and farther from any existence at all. Soon there will be no one left who can rein in the Jewel's destructive power, and no peace we can make will withstand it.

I hope Random doesn't know that I'm here now, only two weeks after signing the treaty, back in Olympus in a desperate bid to hold that treaty up. I can't let slip this thing we worked so hard for, perhaps the last thing Random will be aware of achieving, perhaps the last thing he will remember at all. I can't let this thing with Gabrielle get in my way.

The two Strikes are in conversation with her by the tree line when I get back, but she bows out at my approach, and I realize that I didn't have any reason to come this way. To cover I ask my Strike, "You were up all night?" She has taken to sporting a beard when she is in my form, so we're less alike, which reminds me I should never grow a beard.

"I'm learning a lot," she flicks her eyes to her new soul-mate, "we both are. Things about where we came from and what our nature might be."

Gabrielle's armor nods in agreement. She looks like Gabrielle, herself, except of course that she's unscarred.

I've never seen Strike scuff her feet before. I feel the feather-touch of her in my mind; her mood is uneasy. She's uncomfortable with the way this situation is affecting me, but she wants me to leave her to talk in peace. *It's important.*

"Keep your heads together, then. If we can confirm things about Corwin pretty quickly here, maybe we can locate more of your people on Arena. Allies would be welcome, in what's to come." By the smooth way I feel my words passing through both Strikes, I know mine has informed Gabrielle's of everything, all our problems. I hope that is wise, but say nothing.

I go.

I am saved struggling through the rest of the morning by the arrival of the Greek messenger. He's just a kid, wiry, deeply tanned and blond, and not wearing much. Still in the heat, his headband is soaked with sweat,

and his hair sticks to him in curls. I find, looking at him, that I've just noticed it *is* hot this morning. It simply hadn't occurred to me before.

The messenger bows in my direction and addresses me in the singsong Thari that has evolved here. "Prince Ezekiel, your escort has arrived." This pronouncement made, he returns the way he came without waiting for an answer.

"Let's pack it up," I say, pointlessly. John is already tying down the top of an efficient-looking backpack. My own supplies, such as they are, never got opened the night before. Gabrielle has everything with her that she had when we met in the woods yesterday: her cloak; a silver knee brace she wears as an affectation from Arena; and the Pattern blade.

She spares me a glance, eyebrows raised. She's ready.

I wave to the Strikes, both of whom start heading our way. While I shoulder my pack, Old John comes over to tighten the straps for me. "Is it smart, her coming with us? It's bad enough we have that shape-shifting friend of yours to worry about, now we've got two of 'em and some broad who'd like to see your father dead on the end of her sword." He had more to say on the subject, but this flood of speech seems to have used him up for the time being.

I consider while I steady his pack in turn. "I think we have less to worry about if she's with us."

"Why is she here?"

"I don't know." I feel the need to protest further, because I'm afraid I *do* know. "I really don't know what she's doing or what she might do. I'm not sure she knows. But I'd rather she did it here in front of us than somewhere out there," I tilt my head towards the edge of the field, "where we can't watch it happen."

Old John looks Gabrielle's way. He obviously isn't too concerned if she knows his suspicions. Having decided something, he nods abruptly and gives a grunt. The matter is concluded for him. "Go on ahead of us," he says to me. "You've got the status on this."

I lead us all across the encampment again to the Lieutenant's field office. By the time we pick our way through the men and their tents and equipment, we can see the gold glitter of the decorations on the newly arrived chariot: Athene's emblems. I am relieved it isn't Apollo's own. I'd hoped

to have time to hear some views on his likely position towards our request, and Athene, like me, had opposed the war from the start.

I present us all to the Lieutenant again. He looks directly at me this time, acknowledging us, as though chastened into good behavior by Lady Athene's presence. She emerges from the officers' tent, then. A radiance emanates from her and from the emblazoned breastplate she wears, adding a more humane warmth to the harsh yellow of the morning's light.

Athene recognizes me, too. Her smoothly tanned, classic face relaxes minutely. "Prince Ezekiel."

I bow to her. "Athene. These are my companions. John, Aide to King Random; Lady Gabrielle; and our two associates, Strike and... Strike."

"I remember Strike," interrupts Athene. She seems amused, "Although I don't recall her taking this form. Mostly she was in the shape of a winged demon—or a... motorcycle do you call it?—while she was in our company."

If Strike is made uncomfortable by Athene's reference to her captivity, she doesn't show it. I doubt she's paying much attention, anyway. She and Gabrielle's armor are still in some deep state of mental communication. I am briefly tempted to read in, but I restrain the impulse.

"Just call me 'Gabrielle' if you don't mind," says Gabrielle curtly.

I shrug off Gabrielle's hostility and Athene's confused look. "As we go, maybe you can bring me up to date on the situation here. We've come because of some new information we have on one of our missing family, Corwin. You may recall Apollo instituted a search for him here shortly after the treaty was signed."

Athene nods and her eyes narrow. She agrees to speak further as we ride, and she and I help John, the Strikes, and Gabrielle into the back of the open chariot. I get in last and pick my way to the front to be within comfortable conversational distance of Athene. The seating is not crowded, though I wouldn't guess it from Gabrielle's posture; she's crammed herself into the farthest back right corner, looking steadily out to the right as Athene walks the horses out of the encampment and then whips them up to speed.

We pass through a series of orchards and the small town I recall from my earliest visit here. The season seems to be late spring. Everything

is green. Even among the rocky fields masses of windflowers find purchase. In the distance is a mountain range, made ghostly by a misty haze: heat and moisture rising from the lowlands. The heavy dampness of the air is only made bearable by the wind of our passage.

When we're clear of the last remnants of the town, Athene lets the horses have their head. The rhythmic pounding of their hooves and the bunching of the muscles of their haunches take on a strained quality as their strides lengthen. Abruptly they pull the chariot into the air, working hard as against a steep incline. Foam flecks and lather fly from the braces chafing their sides. The ground falls away from us at a dizzying rate. Athene looks back and down at me a moment, radiant.

I've seen this before. I'm impressed again, anyway, and tell her so.

Across from me, Old John keeps his own counsel, neither voicing his thoughts nor allowing them to influence his expression.

Gabrielle is a blank, too, but only because she has turned so far away from me as to be twisted nearly 180 degrees at the waist. She seems to be resting her head on her crossed arms, looking out over the back of the chariot, a posed show of relaxation so artificial she looks like a model in a magazine.

I pull my attention off Gabrielle and force myself to speak to Athene about my imminent meeting with Apollo: what will be his attitude; how do I avoid insulting him; has he any influence in Hades's realm, where Corwin or his remains have probably been taken? I register about half of her replies. They are generally disheartening, but I did promise I'd see this through. If its logical conclusion is a stone wall, at least I'll have seen the wall for myself.

We finally fall silent in awe of Olympus looming ahead. Turning from the aching whiteness of it, I look down on the lesser mountains below. They are covered thickly with blue-green pine and spruce. Forgetting myself, I speak around the sudden sharpness in my throat, "It's like Blue Ridge."

Gabrielle looks across the chariot at me; the abrupt rise of her tension sends Old John's hand hovering over the hilt of his blade. "You said you'd let it lie," she says in a hoarse voice. She holds my bewildered gaze for another moment, and then turns again to the vista behind us.

I stare at her stiff back, cursing myself. I don't just remember how it

felt to be the Zeke who loved her. I am feeling it, along with the pain of hindsight and history, and the knowledge of what my father did to her. Why I'm not cursing him, I don't yet fully understand.

The merest judder announces our chariot's return to solid ground. Athene drives the horses up a broad, curving road built specifically to reveal the grandeur of Apollo's palace in the most sudden and breathtaking way. I

only know this having ridden this path once before. The echo of Gabrielle's bitterness makes the scene dull and distant.

We speed past marble gatehouses and enter the palace through an archway of unnatural white. We draw to a stop in an immense interior courtyard. Athene climbs down. "I will announce our arrival." Her voice is subdued. She gestures towards an ornate fountain surrounded by cushions. "Please be seated."

Athene leaves, her footsteps soundless even on the marble tiles of the courtyard. Gabrielle climbs down out of the chariot first, followed by the Strikes and Old John. He blatantly estimates the defenses of the palace, and the slope of his shoulders after his first survey shows his judgment: if Apollo doesn't suffer us to leave, we won't be leaving. The treaty between us will be fresh in Apollo's mind, however; he won't risk a new war by interfering with his first Amber visitors, not yet. I am certain of this.

Apollo's meeting with us is as perfunctory as diplomatic courtesy allows. As Athene had warned, he refuses to interfere with Hades's business, though there is little affection between them. Hades is the elder, here, I am reminded, even though it is Apollo who was chosen to lead.

There does seem to be a small opening, though, and I press it. "If you will not interfere yourself, would you allow us to travel to Hades's realm ourselves and take up our questions with him directly?"

"You would enter hell? You realize he has already denied me any involvement in this matter."

I sense a danger in implying any duplicity here. "He may have knowledge that could lead us to Corwin." I pause to make it clear to Apollo that I am giving him something. "The timing is getting critical for us; we don't know how long he'll be able to remain himself within the Jewel."

There is a long silence, here, profound, as if the thin air of the mountain wicked noise away along with heat and color. Apollo finishes a goblet of wine and looks over the double pair of us: Gabrielle and me, Strike and her new companion. His gaze does not even seem to take in Old John, whom he has dismissed as a servant. When he is completely ready, he says, "Know again that I will not intercede in Hades's realm. That compact even our treaty cannot break."

There is some bitterness around this that I feel more than hear in

Apollo's voice. He suspects Hades has not been entirely forthcoming with him, I think. "I understand."

"You will need a guide."

Perfectly on cue, Dionysus enters. He bears himself with his usual jollity in spite of the fact that when last we met he was trying to murder my best friend. All's fair, as they say. Apollo stands, commanding Dionysus to join him privately when he is done greeting us.

By way of small talk Dionysus and I trade drinks; I admit to him Chaos Ale isn't what it used to be since we had to lower the random factors to prevent it from causing cancer. I give him a bit of the real stuff from my flask, which he agrees is much better, though of course, he says with a wink, completely immoral.

I know enough of Dionysus's wine by reputation to have no more than a taste. He watches me slyly as I sip it. The flavor is immense and nourishing, hard to describe really. I understand it delivers a high to kill for. Many have. Dionysus smiles as I let him see how hard it is for me to hand him back the skin.

"Gotta check in with His Maj," Dionysus grins. "Back in a minute."

I doubt that grin will still be there after Apollo tells him what he's being asked to do.

It is still early in the day yet, and John, Gabrielle and I stretch our legs more and prepare to set off again. Our chariot will be a more mundane one for the next leg of our journey, but according to Apollo's description the distance is not so great. I'm pleased we'll have ordinary horses, a team I can drive when our guide becomes incapacitated, which seems inevitable. We should reach the entrance to Hades's realm by nightfall.

I lose my bet with myself about Dionysus. For now, at least, he's pretending good cheer. He comes out of Apollo's audience arms wide, clapping the Strikes on their backs, shouting for supplies in spite of the fact that the chariot has apparently been ready for us for some time—or was created from whole cloth by Apollo somehow.

We clamber in and ride down the winding carriage road. It is impossibly short, as though small pieces of the descent were stitched together into a road only a half-mile long instead of the ten or fifteen miles it ought to be. Our ears should be bursting from the pressure change, but we feel

nothing.

From there our day-long journey is uneventful, if a bit bumpy. I keep Dionysus up in the front with me, to keep him from talking to Gabrielle as though she were actually going to answer. It is late evening when we arrive at the bone-littered rock scree that hides Hell's Mouth, and I am frankly exhausted. My every word has turned into a minefield of hidden meanings, real and imagined, and Gabrielle picks them up like she's collecting trophies.

I leave it to Old John to survey the entrance to Hell. It's a simple-enough-seeming cave mouth set into the side of one of Olympus's foothills. Dionysus finally reveals his feelings on the matter, suggesting we get drunk instead of going in. I, for one, am willing to delay the confrontation with Hades until tomorrow.

We back off from the cave to the tree line and find a defensible clearing in which to camp. I'm too tired to pitch a tent, and the weather this close to the mountain's cooling breeze is something out of a Mediterranean holiday brochure, so I just stretch out on top of my bedroll. Gabrielle stays up talking to the Strikes in a low voice; Old John watches her with undisguised suspicion; Dionysus sings to himself; and I decide silence is less tiring than trying to make conversation. Sleep comes abruptly.

By morning Dionysus has worked himself up into a fine frenzy of cowardice. I inform him that Apollo has assigned him to guide us into Hades's realm and out again, and that he should consider the uses Apollo might find for his intestines should his failure result in any harm to the King of Amber's son. Surprisingly, this works.

I am not happy. I feel like I'm on the set of a horror film; I don't know which of us is scripted to die, and which of us gets to go on to the sequel.

Strike, sensing my mood, comes over to me. "Um, I suppose it won't help to say I'm getting a bad feeling about this."

"Not a lot." But I smile to let her know I appreciate her anyway.

It's a shame I was right. Her bad feeling didn't help at all.

Gabrielle II

The nature of hell is not screaming and torture and fire, though for those creative enough to imagine it, those things do exist. The nature of hell is *eternity*. The words "forever" and "endless," the lack of horizon: these things define it. Hours of walking in the stink of decay over the tumble-down footing of tossed limbs and broken skulls have brought us no closer to the black spires of Hades's palace, nor, looking back, has the small light of the shadow's cavern mouth receded.

We escaped Cerberus by crossing the Acheron's waters, but now that only seems to mean we are fully within the place no mortal has ever successfully left behind. We've brushed through a dozen partial Shadow veils to make it this far, according to the Strikes, but since the last one passed, nothing has changed for what could have been a full day of travel.

Dionysus turned as white and expressionless as candle wax the moment we entered, and he hasn't regained his color. His only comment was that he could feel another sword, one like Gabrielle's, somewhere ahead of us. It is the only thing that keeps us moving; I'm sure he regrets saying it.

There is no place to stop that doesn't involve resting upon the ripped, trampled corpses that make our road, or the fleshier ones that make our landscape. Along the way, sometimes, we would see them close their eyes before we tread upon them. After a while, we stopped noticing. A while after that, Old John let his gun hand drop, unready. Now his eyes are dull, too. He moves forward only because I move forward. Something has to change.

I know that, in what's left of their minds, it is what the dead must say.

I gesture with my hand, and Strike moves up, morphing into armor around me.

"What?" asks Gabrielle. This place has drained the force from her emotions, and she speaks quietly.

"We're not getting anywhere."

"I know."

Dionysus nods. Old John just looks blankly into the unchanging distance.

"We have to go a different way."

Gabrielle shrugs. "I can't shift Shadow here at all." And she knows I can't shift anywhere. "Strike feels no further veils to move through. Are you getting the idea we don't have the tools to do this?"

"We do. We have the Logrus." I look at Dionysus.

It takes him a second to respond. "Oh, no way. Never. Not in *his* realm. He'd hear us comin' way in advance."

I get suspicious, suddenly. "But we're never going to get there walking, you know."

"Of course not. We can't get there." Dionysus looks a little happier. "There's nothing for it; we've got to give it up."

"You knew we couldn't make it this way."

The old level of worry works its way back across his chubby face, "Now, look, that's something every being must come to on its own. Inevitability... it's personal. I couldn't just tell you."

"But you *could* do it. You can sense the Pattern in the sword; you can feel where the palace is," I look at the shadowy towers so far ahead of us. "The Logrus could take us there."

Dionysus's fear makes it clear I am correct. "Look, Hades will be angry with me."

"Hades has Corwin. Hades having Corwin dumps our treaty down the black Abyss. No treaty, no reason not to kill you for... everything you've done." Strike purrs in my mind, but I don't need her encouragement. I've rounded on Dionysus, and all I can see is red light, destroying Random's mind and soul, while Hades and Chaos wait to feed on the remains.

I see Dionysus stiffen, and I remember how cold it can feel when Strike lets her liquid flesh go metal against your skin. She's taken hold of his feet and is halfway up his calves. I wonder how far up his pants her tendrils are touching. "Help us, now. Or say 'no' and cut me loose. I've stood in the middle and protected worms like you and Fiona from one another for the past three years. I've come here to hell in service of your miserable existence, because peace seemed worth it. If you are telling me that the last chance for that is done with," I blink, pause, bare my teeth in a face completely unlike smiling, "let me know." I push him with my mind and with the force of Strike's grip, not to take him over, but to prove I do not

care. It is not in me to feel this way, to believe this, but I do. That I frighten myself is perhaps what scares Dionysus most.

He looks into my mind's eye for a long moment. "Where do you want to arrive?" he whispers back.

Gabrielle III

The transition from the road to the courtyard of Hades's palace is abrupt and disorienting, though less for me than for Gabrielle, whose nerves, newly awakened to the Pattern, are rubbed raw by the grating flow of the Logrus streaming around us. When it stops, her Strike catches her and holds her up while she recovers.

Off the endless road, Old John comes back to us. He clicks into his usual level of defensive awareness with a shake of his head and a growl that might be, "Sorry."

We get no time to rest; Hades makes his move immediately. A voice rings in my head, huge and implacable, too big to be angered by our small intrusion. *You want what is mine.* A glance at my companions confirms that he touches them, too.

"We want Corwin and what is Corwin's." I reply out loud, denying the power he uses so blatantly.

The blade was made for a god, not the empty shell that Oberon's son has become.

"Corwin will be restored."

Not if the Serpent denies him.

Hades had discovered much. "Amber will not let you keep them."

Attack and my brothers will defend me. Apollo would not be strong enough to stay their anger.

"If the Serpent doesn't relent, Amber dies anyway. She will not hesitate to take her enemies with her. Is that what you are? Her enemy?"

There is no answer. I whisper to Dionysus, "Can't you get us closer?"

He shakes his head. "I'm trying, but he's blocking me. He shunted us to this courtyard when I tried to get us to the blade. I told you..."

"Keep trying. Any break, any distraction, take us in."

Old John speaks, "Why doesn't he come for us, then?"

The voice returns, even larger than before. *Come see what I have done with your pathetic uncle.* Dionysus squints to maintain concentration on his task. Gabrielle and I nod to one another, though she is still breathing hard from the transport. This cannot be good.

A mote of light, emitted from a corpse's milky eye, floats up from the courtyard's broken fountain and drifts in the direction of a tower's door and stair. We all follow, tense. I see Dionysus stumble; his concentration elsewhere. Strike catches his elbow and steadies him, to which, in his distraction, he gives an almost grateful smile.

The tower's door opens for us, and closes behind us. We climb. It is a short, squat building, maybe thirty feet high. The stairs are so old as to be worn to curves in their centers. The dust and grit in their corners hold half-recognizable knucklebones and teeth. We emerge onto the tower's flat, square top. Harsh wind whips between the crenellations; we are much higher up than it had seemed, impossibly high.

Hideous screams, not the voice of Hades but of several things more insane and less human, echo around us. Up and over the edges, a half-dozen obese hags lift themselves towards us on absurd broken wings. Greyish spittle steams at the corners of their fanged mouths, and a smell of violated entrails wells up with them. The dry click of failed gunfire and a curse come from Old John's direction. Gabrielle and I draw simultaneously, and the Strikes whir up into armor for each of us, a blur of bladed tentacles around Gabrielle and me.

For a few moments it is mere combat. The hags dash themselves at us, lacking any but animal intelligence. Strike and I smash one, then two to bits against the stone edges of the tower, and the ichor of a third sprays caustically against us as Gabrielle takes off its arm and wing in a single blow with Werewindle.

Dionysus is on his knees; dark tendrils of Logrus, visible in this place as blue-black smoke, curl around him and he screams in concentration against Werewindle's Pattern light. If Hades could be distracted *now*... But the remaining harpies have taken Gabrielle and Werewindle as their target. They tangle themselves in her Strike's tentacles, flapping and shrieking as they drag both of them to the very edge of the tower. Old John

lets off four bolts from a crossbow, and one of the harpies drops, but she is a dead weight, and her claws still cling to a piece of Strike's mass. I hear it happen. I hear the other Strike realize they are going to fall, and release herself from Gabrielle to fall alone. Still, she fights. Mercury spears emerge from her, stabbing desperately at the unyielding stone, wrapping a crenellation as her main mass goes over the edge with the last two hags now trying to pull free of her, gouging at her with claws and teeth. We are frozen in hope for a moment.

Hades's lightning finishes her. There is a crack, and an explosion of stone looses her grip.

We are left there in the smell of ozone and shit. Gabrielle, unarmored, goes to her knees and screams. The sound is drowned in Hades's laugh.

Dionysus shouts, "Now!"

Suddenly it is still, cold and dark. Spots from the flash of the Logrus, pulling us all with Werewindle bared are burned green in my vision. Dionysus moans. As my eyes adjust I see him on the floor clutching his head in his hands. Strike and I turn in a circle, quickly. This is an underground hall. Parallel rows of columns hold up a ceiling that disappears in darkness above us. Light comes from only two places around us: Werewindle, across Gabrielle's lap, and Greyswandir, hovering point down close to the floor, not ten feet away.

I step towards Gabrielle and Old John steps between us and the hovering blade. Before we can say or do anything else, it spears towards him. In a surreal moment, Greyswandir's light disappears into John's chest and emerges, red-stained, on the other side. He gapes in surprise, and is lifted and flicked aside like meat from a spit. His body hits one of the pillars and slides to the ground.

Thank you, Brother.

Dionysus moans.

You have brought me two blades and my enemies to suffer helplessly before me.

"I never," I think is what Dionysus says.

Greyswandir lowers itself, is lowered, and comes forward the length of a step. There is a shimmer, and Hades appears, lifting his helm off of his

head with his free hand. As when I last saw him, he looks like Oberon in the old portraits, but if possible more arrogant, more insane. Flickers of angry blue-black mark his one-handed grip on Corwin's Pattern blade, but he seems well able to withstand the conflict of energies.

"So, boy," Hades deigns to speak to me with the voice of his mouth. Strike splits for me, and with a familiar, cracking pain across my shoulder blades, my wings unfurl. They will be little armor against Greyswandir's stroke, when it comes, but they are something. Gabrielle is leaning back against my shins. Greyswandir's brother is loose in her hand, across her lap like an offering.

"I have my war. Oberon's world dies. I am in a position to be generous. Do you want to die first, or watch her die?" He opens his arms, helm and sword, in a gesture of choice.

There is the smallest flicker of tension in the warmth of Gabrielle's back against me. I hope it means what I think it means.

I throw myself forward, arms, wings, and sword, up and directly into Hades's sudden defensive swipe with Greyswandir. I make it feel like I'm throwing myself into death, because nothing else will be powerful enough. Strength from my legs and Strike's pushes me up as that blade bites through wing and metal and part of Strike's mass.

From my feet there is a blur. A beat later a scream splits my skull, and an explosion of force and black light blows me crashing back over Dionysus's prostrate body. Then, for a time, it is truly dark.

Gabrielle IV

I shake my muzzy head. "There is no mistake," I say to Apollo, "Hades is dead." We are seated across from each other back by the fountain pool in the courtyard of Mt. Olympus.

Many miles and several Shadow veils from here, Gabrielle and Strike speed back to Amber. They carry Corwin's body and his blade and Old John, badly wounded through the lung. He is being held in stasis by Strike in the hopes he'll survive to be treated in Amber. Gabrielle's Strike was our sacrifice. In the end, with just the four of us standing—Gabrielle, Dionysus, Strike, and me—we couldn't carry her.

Apollo darkens, his perfect sculptured body and young boy's face in tight control. "Tell me."

I tell him everything—almost everything—my voiced edged with a sawing exhaustion. What I tasted on the night of our arrival before the entrance to Hades was nothing compared to this state. It is almost surreal.

"Dionysus's senses confirmed that Prince Corwin's blade, at least, did reside in Hades's palace..."

"I asked Hades!" The storm in Apollo's eyes boils forward, near to exploding, "I demanded..."

"Then he defied you. The blade was there." My voice is flat. I see no purpose in hiding anything and have no energy to soften the tale with pretty words.

On a different tack, Apollo asks, "Where are your companions? What was their role in this?"

I am prepared for this one. "I sent them back with Prince Corwin's body. Old John and Gabrielle were both wounded. As to their role, they were accompanying me on this mission for the King of Amber and were under my orders. They did nothing I didn't sanction."

His fear that kinslaying Amberites might be slipping through his fingers allayed, Apollo motions for me to continue.

"Dionysus was able to bring us to Hades's doorstep, but was blocked from going further. When we confronted Hades about Greyswandir, he led us up into one of his palace's towers 'to show us something.' At its top he attacked us with some monstrous servants. One of my companions was killed there." Gabrielle's Strike. Her other half. Her voice. Her hand. Let her hate someone else for that, now. I'm too tired.

"Again, without Dionysus's skill, we probably would not have survived. I have to thank you for providing him, and apologize for doubting he would be helpful. Even with the magical blocks Hades had in place, Dionysus was able to move us back into the palace. He sought with the Logrus for the place where Hades had hidden Greyswandir. We hoped that speed and surprise would allow us to retrieve it—and Corwin, if he were there—and simply leave without further confrontation.

"Instead, Hades tracked us to that place—some dungeon within his palace—and began raving that he would kill us all and keep Werewindle

as well. Using Greyswandir, Hades attacked. It was at this point that Old John was wounded.

"If we had not had a Pattern blade of our own, I assume he would have carried out the rest of his threat. As it was..." I shrug painfully and meet Apollo's eyes. They are angry, yes, but not hostile and not unreasoning—a look with which I was all too familiar from his rages and posturings before the treaty. "Your brother was either insane or so sure of winning that he grew careless. He removed his helm to gloat, and we killed him."

A long silence follows. Looking away from me, Apollo speaks. "I assume you will be returning to Amber under immunity." He grates out the last two words, looking for some outlet for his bitterness.

I have already decided not to give him this. "No. The treaty and the truth will stand up better if it is brought out here, in Greece. I will need to communicate with Amber, but I would like to face a tribunal here to repeat this story." My hands are open to him. "Hades attacked us with the openly stated intention of killing us. I am sorry his death was the result, but I would do it again. You can confirm these details with Dionysus, when he sobers."

Eyes closed, Apollo nods slowly. When he opens them I offer my Trump card to him. He leans towards me and reaches for it. For a moment, we both hold it, long enough for him to know that I know the import of this offer, what trust it implies—if not in Apollo personally, then in Greece as a State. "Ares will be... difficult to control," he says at last.

"If he doesn't understand self-preservation, then I don't know what to say to him."

"I wish..." he looks at me almost shyly—a god and king is not supposed to wish in the hearing of mere mortals, or Amberites—"I wish we had never become entangled with Amber, with any of you."

I bite back a bitter laugh of disbelief. I think about Merlin and Hephaestus and Orion, Corwin, Old John. Gabrielle. The second Strike—the only other one of her kind my best friend had ever found—all dead now, or hurt or lost, for this, for these petty gods and Oberon's bad judgment. "Me, too," is all I can say. No curse seems sufficient.

More time passes. We both contemplate the complex play of the fountain. Finally I hear Apollo murmur something about me waiting while

he holds a brief meeting. I am half-asleep by now and dazzled by the sunlight on the fountain. I think I nod an acknowledgement.

I awaken as Apollo returns. Athene is with him, her expression unreadable. I stand, wincing as my crossed legs wake up with me. Apollo is distant and regal again, gazing at a space just above my head. "I want you to leave now. If there is to be a tribunal, you will be called."

"It would be best if there were. Without it, people will think…"

"I know what people will think. Just go." Apollo waves Athene towards me and strides back into the shade of the interior.

I already knew he was aware of the implications. I wanted Athene to know that I was aware of them as well.

On the way back, seated again in Athene's chariot, my brain is a muddle. I watch the scenery roll out behind us magically, a swath of hills and trees and flowers with the white crown of Olympus imperious over everything, her cold breath fogging her flanks. This place is almost paradise.

I try to concentrate on the events of the past two days and I can't; it occurs to me that Apollo has been in my mind. I decide to be concerned later. I told the truth, and now he knows I told the truth.

Not all the truth.

Okay, I left out Gabrielle's part, mostly. But what difference should that make?

If it doesn't make any difference, why'd you leave her out?

Dammit, I don't know. I guess I did it for the same reason I sent her back with Strike and Old John and Corwin. This was my mission, my responsibility.

You're protecting her. Do you know how little sense that makes?

Shut. The fuck. UP!

Outside Greece, I Trump Gérard for a lift home.

Gabrielle V

Gérard and Caine let me sleep before our meeting, but it doesn't help much. Sleep is a long time coming, and I wake up with a start only an hour later. The new, vivid twist to the old nightmares has me bathed in sweat; the sheet beneath me is soaked with it. I lie panting, the covers of my

bed twisted around my legs.

I raise my head and look down while I extract my feet. Between them and me is a body still unmarked, except for the crooked place in the skin of my chest where Gabrielle's spear took me some fifty years ago. No matter what form I shift to, that imperfection remains.

Letting out a breath, I allow my head to drop back onto the pillow. The morning light of Amber tries to get in around the blackout curtains I'd drawn across my windows. Little flashes of image from the nightmare come back to me, but I don't get up to banish them. I want to remember. Following one back, I do:

We are there again, in Hell. A madness of barking heralds Cerberus behind us; ahead, Hades's dead army marches towards us like a relentless engine.

Old John is at our back. The roar of his guns adds to the din.

And 'we' are Gabrielle and me. The body of her Strike is broken on the ground between us. Gabrielle holds the old stump of her wrist against her chest, cradling her elbow in her left hand. She rocks on her feet, keening, a reed in the wind. In this dream-memory the wound of her lost hand is suddenly fresh again, and she pales as her blood escapes in fatal beats.

In slow motion I grab for her, but the corpse of her armor and friend is a wall between us, holding me back as she dies.

Half awake again, I shake my head. That's not the way it was.

In the dungeons of Hades's castle, the glow of the spells imprisoning Corwin is our only light. I have scaled my back and spread my demon wings to protect our advance. For some reason I am uncomfortable, and looking down I see that dream has again intruded on memory: I am wearing my orange skin-suit from the Arena. It has been torn haphazardly to allow for my wings, and they are constricted.

The binding spells on Corwin are a thing of Logrus and as Gabrielle cuts them with Werewindle the light of their destruction outlines her body and makes a wild angel of her.

Gabrielle and I turn together as one creature, tuned to the same fighting

march. Hades, my great uncle, Lord of the Underworld, stands before us. His helm is in his hand so that we may see him as he destroys us. Corwin's sword, Greyswandir, sings its Pattern-based rebellion in Hades's hand, but it must obey him anyway.

And the crowd is with us, now, 'Zeke, Zeke, Zeke! 'Rielle, 'Rielle, 'Rielle! No one seems to notice my changed form, the scales of my wings, that I'm cheating. I call the move to Gabrielle in the lingo of the team—sacrifice high!—and flick the tip of my wing out and up into the base of Hades's helm, held in his left hand. The helm goes flying and his empty hand droops, numbed by the force of my blow.

Surprised at my audacity, roaring, Hades comes over and across with Greyswandir. She bites down deeply through the top of my wing, fine bones and membranes and hard metal scale all the same to her. I scream, only half-forcing it—another distraction to cover Gabrielle's spring.

Beneath me, Gabrielle is a deadly missile, Werewindle at its tip. Launched from my feet up into the expanse of belly Hades exposed by attacking me, she goes right through him. Only a fireball of Logrus-infused flesh is left behind her in this dream place, though in actuality the fire burned much longer.

Gabrielle turns to me and shakes out her hair with her free hand. Gore from Hades's dissolution drips from her.

"You've done it, Zeke," she says to me. "You're on the team. I didn't think it was possible. You could take Hitch down next if you wanted him." She smiles through the glistening mask of Hades's remains, pleased.

"To the Cavaliers!" Gabrielle holds her hand out to me, her right hand, shaped in perfect likeness by Strike, hers or mine, I cannot tell.

Suddenly I am fifteen, in the dungeon of Hades's palace, in the Arena, in the team ring. The tale of Ezekiel and the Arena is about to begin. "No!" I try to shout. "Not this!"

It's over. I blink, remember the dream and catalog it. The sound of Gabrielle running water in the adjoining room comforts me. I roll over into her pillow and inhale the smell of her and hope my thrashing in the night did not disturb her.

My belly warms as I think of her, bending, as she must be now, over

the bath, her tight body arched, stretching for the tap. A smile on my face, I get up and go to her in the next room.

The tub is very full, and the water is red.

Steam blinds me suddenly as I grab for her; she's bled to death, or is about to. Frantically I lunge into the tub, heedless of the water, hot to the point of scalding. There is nothing there. She's dissolved, or disappeared, or gone down the drain: senseless skittering thoughts bombard me.

The head of the spear appears from out of the mist, and I smile, relieved. "This explains everything," I think as I spread my arms to accept it.

Epilogue

Now I am awake. Awake. Awake! Damn it. My throat is raw, and the sweat of the dream-bed has followed me here. This has got to stop.

I still love her.

There must be a point where that is true but not relevant. There must come a moment where that doesn't threaten to make decisions for me. "Live with it," I tell myself. The Serpent and its bloody Eye call and do not give ground based on the state of my ashen heart. I get up and stagger into the bathroom. At the sight of the empty bath I vomit uncontrollably until I am empty and exhausted.

It is some time later that I am presentable enough to go out into the morning and meet with my uncles. They will want a full report.

END

Note: Ezekiel was originally created for the campaign *Judgment Day* run in London by John Davies from 1993 to 1996. JD was one of the best, most thoughtful, thought-provoking GMs I have ever had. He continues this fine tradition professionally as Jade Enterprises, the publisher of the play-by-mail game, Absolute Heroes.

Simone Cooper:

Simone Cooper is a long-time gamer and Amber fan, whose obsession has led her to be an ongoing organizer for AmberCon UK and then AmberCon NW since 1993 (see www.ambercons.com). She writes quite a bit in her spare time, when she's not being a professional dog trainer. No, really. She hopes to continue in the hobby pretty much forever, and her goal is to become an eccentric old woman gamer with bugs and flowers in her hats.

Melissa Gay:

Melissa Gay pursued a BA degree in Studio Art at the University of the South (c' 1990), an MS degree in Biology from Middle Tennessee State University, and a less-than-satisfying career in fine art before realizing that she had always wanted to be a fantasy illustrator. In 1998 she began to show and sell prints of fairy paintings at science fiction conventions, and she has been happy ever since. Her illustrations have appeared in lab manuals, herbals, a comic book, a newspaper, and a gaming magazine.

Melissa Gay lives in Nashville, Tennessee, with her husband and baby son, one resident cat, and two cats errant who just stop by for meals. When not drawing or painting, she is reading or singing to her child, practicing Wado-Ryu Karate, roleplaying, hiking, writing, harassing a musical instrument, sewing, or otherwise getting into mischief. She first read Zelazny's Amber novels while in high school and has been playing the Amber DRPG regularly (some might say obsessively!) since 1993.

"These illustrations are dedicated to my son Brendan, who tried at every opportunity to help me draw them."

CORWIN: TO FIONA

by Genevieve Cogman

Sister, your face is turned away,
And yet I know that you observe
Our little dance around the throne:
So will you reign, or will you serve?
Your eyes are shyly lowered now,
Your hair as bright as funeral pyres:
But yet it never burns as bright
As your ambition's inner fires.

Your skin, translucent as a pearl,
Covers a soul less pure by far:
Your eyes, as green as emeralds,
More distant than the loneliest star:
That private smile you always wear
Over a mouth that's full of lies
Is beautiful upon your face,
But never reaches to your eyes.

I cannot trust you to obey,
I would not wish you to control:
I cannot even read your face,
I could not ever judge your soul.
Sister, be careful where you tread:
Although your smile be full of sin,
I'd rather see your living face
Than see a skull's eternal grin.

The Magician

The Diary of Adréano D'al Szoli
By Todd E. Worrell
Illustrated by Boris Sirbey

Chapter 1

I feinted high then cut low. The punk ignored the feint and put both blades in the way of the ankle-slicer. Idiot. I could have easily given him a new haircut, extra-short, but I wanted him alive to answer my questions. He swung back with both blades, leaving him open to just about anything I cared to throw at him. I didn't care; I parried with the dagger in my left hand and stepped back to look him over.

He wasn't anything special—just another guttersnipe tech-trash, probably looking for some creds to buy skeev. Plasmetal hardware circled his head, and some bionics showed through the torn left sleeve of his pseudo-leather jacket. Still, it was obvious that he wasn't jacked much; he was way too big and slow to be anything but mostly human. The guy twitched and stepped forward again, swinging over his head with the right-hand sword, poking with the left in the general vicinity of my neck. I jumped back and my hat fell off. For a split-second I watched it plummet toward the gutter. My gorgeous crimson genuine benron-pelt top hat was about to bathe in alley slime.

Enough. Seventeen ways to kill him flashed through my brain. I resisted, slid inside his range, sidestepped the thrust, and brought my blade up under the arc of his blow. His sword glanced off mine and pushed my blade towards his head. I slapped the cyberware ringing his skull with the flat side. A milli-second later my dagger ripped open his thigh. I pulled back with it still lodged in his leg and he went sprawling on his back. I stomped on his wrist and shattered it. That was one sword I didn't need to

worry about. I sliced off the fingers of his other hand but he didn't even make a sound. All this took much less than the time necessary to describe it. In fact, maybe a second. I spun quickly and kicked my hat with the tip of my boot mere centimeters before it hit the ground. It bounced up, turned a little circle, and landed back on my head. I allowed myself a moment of smug satisfaction before turning back to goon-boy.

The stink of fried flesh told me he was dead. Apparently his metal braincase had shorted out. Stupid Lectros, wiring themselves up like that. I knew I had hit him on the forehead, but he must have knocked his skull on the street when he fell. I checked for a pulse. Damn. No answers now.

I dragged his corpse into the hazy glow of a street lamp and began ruffling through his clothes. Ugh. He obviously hadn't bathed in too long. I held my breath and rummaged. The punk had jumped me as I took a shortcut through this alley only moments ago—didn't say anything, not even the usual mugger courtesy line "Gimme your creds or I'll kill ya." I hadn't a clue why he wanted to off me. He had that skeevo look, but he was too slow to be on it. Just another loser sunk too far into the slime of the Mezzone to ever crawl out.

He didn't have the usual kit of a skeevo. He wasn't carrying a gun. In fact, he didn't have anything except a folded red piece of paper in an inner pocket. That didn't fit. Maybe he wasn't an addict. I *Found* a flashlight and pried open his jaw. Look Ma, no cavities. So he wasn't a skeevo. Who was he and why did he jump my ass? Was it my good looks?

He had a cheap steel framework around most of his skull and a few cables running from his left elbow up his arm which plugged into the back of his shoulder blade. I cut away his pseudo-leathers and examined the hardware. It looked like standard enhancer gear, but he had moved like it was set on slow-mo. I pulled it all out and looked at it carefully. Nothing there. Hmmm.

I called up the Pattern, gave him the evil eye: no ambients, latents, portents. He looked to all the world like just another dumb dead guy. I wasn't satisfied.

I *Found* a battery-powered electrical razor and shaved his head, trying to touch his greasy hair as little as possible. Score. At the base of his skull was a sort of a raised tattoo or a brand of some kind. It looked a little

bit like the Argethan symbol for mystery, but the top lines were too long and branched. I had never seen it before. Here, I'll draw a picture:

He was either trying to mug me or kill me, but did both extremely poorly. Hunh. No enemies that I knew of ran in this particular Shadow. I myself hadn't been in Mezzone in half a local year at least. Take into account the low quality of the goon, his lack of motivation, and the absence of junk in his pockets, and this was definitely looking like a set-up.

All of this left me standing in an alley on some tech-slum Shadow holding a folded red piece of paper in my hands. I unfolded it and read:

Amirahn the Magnificent

Prognosticator Extraordinaire and Purveyor
of Pleasures from all the Nine Known Worlds

Appearing One Night Only at FAT SAM's Nightclub and Bar,
Nelan's Rock, Kappa Quad

SEE: Amazing Feats of magic to amaze & delight your astounded eyes
HEAR: Impossible Oohs & Aahs of astonishing feats
inexplicable by the laws of physics
FEEL: Dynamic Deeds done for your astounded senses
dazzling & defying common sense.

Tonight Only
1100 P.M.
Upstairs in
Lacey's Lounge

Well, Amirahn might have been a prognosticator extraordinaire, but he or she couldn't write copy for shit.

I re-folded the flyer and slipped it into my inside left jacket pocket. Everyone who is anyone knows I myself dabble in the mundane art of

magic—illusions and slight of hand a specialty. That confirmed my suspicions; it was a trap.

I was flattered.

I hopped a shuttle to Nelan's Rock, found an empty compartment, and took out my deck of cards. Let's see... red Random goes on black Deirdre. A quick reading turned up nothing except the fact that Chaos and Amber didn't mix well. Gee, stop the presses. I selected one particular relative and let the card dance among my fingers. An immense shaggy blond man raising a beer stein in one meaty fist, grinning expansively behind a swooping mustache. His portrait wore hunter's green, with a leather baldric supporting a huge two-handed sword. It wouldn't hurt to have some backup. I concentrated. His large head drifted into focus.

"Who is it?" Marcus asked, chewing loudly and licking his fingers.

"Cousin, it is I: Adréano D'al Szoli. Am I interrupting anything?" That was a laugh. As far as I could tell, Marcus never refused a Trump call. He could be fighting, shitting, or fucking. It didn't matter. He always answered.

"Nah, just having some dinner." His huge grin flashed beneath his broad blond mustache. "What's up?"

"Oh the usual fun and games. Do you recall an establishment named 'Fat Sam's'?"

"The techno place with the colored beers? Yeah." He gulped a few huge swallows off his stein for emphasis.

"Yes, that's the place." I would never classify Fat Sam's as a place with 'the colored beers,' but Marcus had odd priorities. "I'm on my way there now. Would you care to join me? I'll buy."

"Right on! I'll just chow down and get on some rockin' duds. Call ya back, okay?"

"Of course," I smiled and closed the contact. Marcus wasn't yet a hundred, and his penchant for surfer-Shadows showed. Still, he was infallibly honest, straightforward, and wanted nothing more out of life than

a good time. Among my relatives this was quite extraordinary. I wondered how long it would last.

I made use of the facilities, took a quick thermal, shaved, and debated how to wear my hair. Long, black, and thick, most of the time it spiked out in all the directions of the compass. I pulled the top back into a braid and let the back hang loose past my shoulders. Opening my closet I *Found* a long-sleeved high-collared white plascotton shirt and some crimson scaleskin pants. My normal, thigh-high purple and black Zig boots would do just fine. The everyday assortment of bracelets, rings, and my amethyst necklace completed the ensemble.

And of course, my hat. The reflection in the mirror looked appraisingly back at me.

I looked good, but don't I always? "All angles and bones," Dad would say. I got his green eyes, Mom's golden-brown skin, and my own sense of style. I know my way around the Courts as well as the Castle. Pattern is kinked into the crenellations of my brain way beyond my cousins' understanding. Yeah, it comes easy to me; I don't even work at it. I couldn't suppress a cheshire grin.

As I was admiring my handsome reflection, my brain buzzed. It was Marcus. I pulled him through. He was duded up in black vinyl pants and a wide-collared green sleeveless tunic-thing that hung long in front like the Universes' Ugliest Apron. It just had to go. I *Found* him a forest green mesh t-shirt to display his immense frame and persuaded him to wear it.

We whiled away the remaining hour with idle gossip. Marcus was a good source of information on what was happening on the Mountain; he remembered who told him what and what he had seen without bothering to embellish. He was like a robot recording device. Nothing drastic was going on, if you didn't count the problems in Benedict's gardens. Emilëa had made some sort of public scene at dinner and refused to answer any Trump calls. No big loss there, I thought, but Marcus didn't care. I suppose he must have known of all the scheming going on behind the scenes, but he wasn't the type to hunt around backstage.

We disembarked through the captain's portal as befitting local dignitaries, and bypassed the lines at the main entrances to Fat Sam's. I had a passcard key that would open most doors at this place. Sam still owed me

a few favors from that licensing scandal a decade ago. We went in through one of the back doors.

Marcus was like a kid at the zoo, eyes popping out of his skull. I had seen it all too many times, but a quick glance for new developments never hurt. Fat Sam's was an amalgamation of seven pre-fab landing modules joined by corridors that were once various living quarters of E-Class shuttles. On the outside it looked somewhat like the Model of the Atom. Inside it was obvious that what didn't need to be remodeled hadn't been touched. Loose wires hung at odd intervals, and grav-couches littered the passageways. In some places it was so narrow only one person—or two people wearing the same pair of pants—could pass through at a time.

The main bar was called Sam's. It was big, multi-level, and noisy. Upstairs meant Lacey's Lounge, the next module overhead. We climbed up and entered through the main portal to stand in the waiting area. I took a quick glance around. Humanoids of every shape and color crouched or sat near standard fauxwood tables aimed at a small stage. The collective murmur of their voices filled the room like audio fog. Perched for the moment behind the bar, Lacey herself was a fast-talking dynamo. At a shade under five feet, with a bald head, blue eyes and some serious curves, she managed to be everywhere. I don't think I had ever been here when she hadn't tended bar, introduced every act, visited with nearly all of the clientele, and somehow managed to wait on the classy tables herself. Tonight she was decked out in a few velvet straps that let everyone know that her head wasn't the only thing shaved and some latex platform rollerskates. When she saw us waiting at the velvet rope she skated across the floor and a few tables to launch herself into my arms. I hugged her back.

"Adree baby. Skin me, sugar." I pressed my palm to hers. "I knew you would make this scene tonight," she growled in the deep voice of an Erellosian jungle panther.

"You look dazzling as always my lovely lady," I purred and gave her a quick hug. "But there's more of you to see than usual; are you on the prowl once more?"

"Chenna and I are no longer an item. She didn't appreciate me. Hiya big fella," Lacey moved over and wrapped her arms around Marcus. Given their height differential, this put her ample tits up against his crotch.

Lacey did a bump and grind as Marcus blushed and mumbled hello. Lacey pulled away, slipping one hand down to squeeze my cousin's left cheek.

"Mmmm. Good to see you too, Marcus," She smiled up at us both. "Come on, I saved your favorite table." She took our hands and led us toward a booth, stage left, on a level even with the fauxwood performer's area.

"Lacey, how did you know I would be here tonight?"

"Oh," she shrugged. "I bet Leerola a hundred creds that you'd catch this guy's act. Thanks for coming through."

"You are very welcome," I nodded graciously. "Mister Magnificent, what's his story?"

"This old guy showed up yesterday, Sam said. Paid ten thousand creds to do his show. I cancelled amateur night, put out the buzz on the com channels, and here we go. This place is packed. And nobody ever heard of him before."

"Did you post any old-style paper flyers downzone?" I asked.

"Nah. Why bother? Novelty is rare on the Rock. I knew that every spacer within a hundred kiloms would be here. Besides, Grounders are a pain in the hole. Too much broken furniture." She seated us and waved at a waitress.

"It's Steffel's first week. She wants to be a holo-dancer. Don't disappoint me."

"I assure you we will behave like perfect gentlemen," I replied.

"That's what I'm worried about," Lacey laughed and skated away on railings, tables, and, occasionally, the floor.

The warm-up act was a locofoco, probably pulled from the ranks of amateurs expecting to perform tonight. His jokes were stale. I *Found* a laptop and accessed the local market index. My stocks were doing fine. The newscoms were full of the past week's fluff. There was no record of Amirahn anywhere.

That was odd, but not unusual. Nelan's rock sits at the hub of nine Shadows, and the computers here could access all nine if you had the magic touch like I did. I set the scan for the magician's name and/or the symbol decorating the dumb dead guy's skull. It would take a while.

Steffel arrived with our drinks. Tall, pale, and blonde, she was

Marcus's type. Apparently he was hers as well. Now, I am a couple inches over six standard feet, nearly two metroms in local lingo, and every inch pure charm. Steffel passed off my "graceful moves" compliment like I was a groundling clod-farmer. She only had eyes for Cousin Gargantua.

Marcus has a few inches on me in nearly every direction. He was easily the largest human in the club, with arms bigger than Steffel's waistline. Marcus never hesitated when it came to women; he paid for our drinks with a three-hundred cred slip that he tucked into Steffel's garter with instructions for her to spend the change on something fun. She giggled, thanked him, and skated away. So much for my offer to buy.

The strong scent of acrid spacer perfume preceded her return. Steffel slipped Marcus a comstick that undoubtedly contained her personal com code, time she got off work, and a few choice remarks. The big guy was so happy he even forgot to drink his beer—for a few seconds at least.

Local talent bowed and left the stage to a barrage of artillery, both verbal and vegetable. Lacey took the microphone and gave her spiel.

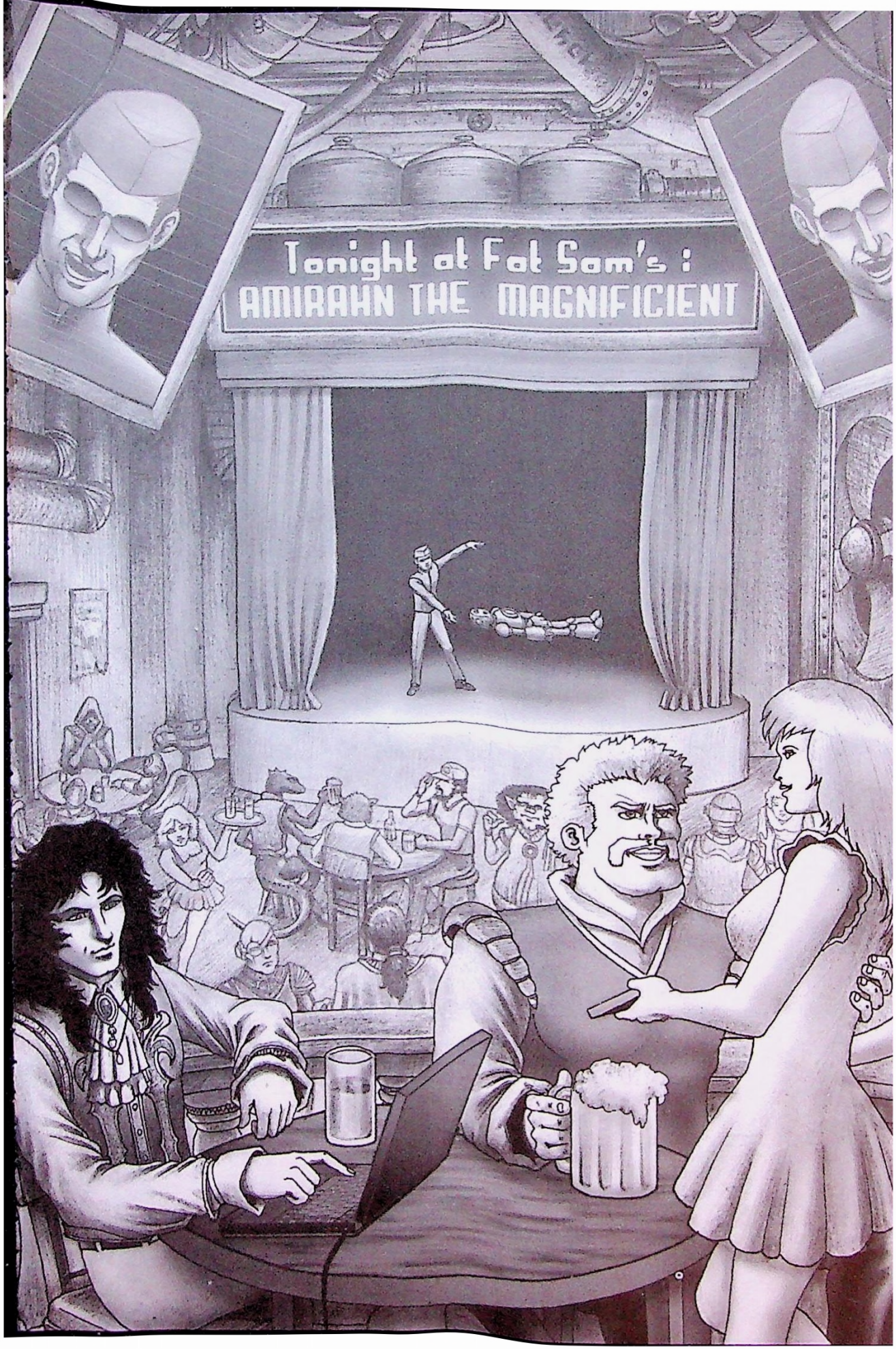
"Ladies, Gentlemen, and the rest of us, it's my pleasure to welcome to the stage appearing for the first time in the Nine Known Worlds, Amirahn the Magnificent."

The curtain drew up as Lacey leapt into the sea of tables and skated back to the bar. A large, square guy in a silver Nehru suit was standing, hands clasped together, in front of a podium. He looked about fifty with gray short hair, wrinkles, and the mirrored shades that all the poprock stars were wearing now. He must have been as wide as he was tall, and his hands were enormous.

His act sucked.

He pulled scarves from his sleeves, made small red balls disappear behind his table, and failed miserably at the worst rendition of the three-candle trick I've ever seen.

I watched with half an eye and let my mind wander. If this was a trap, where were the trappings, so to speak? Nobody had known I was going to Mezzone. I had only decided myself the day before. Maybe I should have dragged my would-be assailant's corpse around, checked to see if any of the local criminals knew him. It might have turned something up, but it would have been hard work. Plus, I would have missed the show.


Tonight at Fat Sam's :
AMIRAHN THE MAGNIFICIENT

If goon-boy were anything special, I would just hunt through Shadow for the symbol on his head. Yeah, like that would be fun.

"Hey, Adréano." Marcus interrupted my thoughts with a tug on my sleeve.

"Something interesting?" I glanced at the stage. Amirahn was sawing an android in half. Boring.

"Nah. I was just wondering, you know, if I could borrow the comp for a sec."

I reoriented the laptop screen. Twenty minutes and nothing found. It was about two-thirds done. Good enough, I figured.

"Of course, cousin." I stopped the scan and slid the computer across the table.

"Thanks, dude." He detached the optical and held it at arm's length from him, pointed at his face. "Hey Steffel. It's me, Marcus. I grok you are one hot chick. Like, I don't know if I'll be around when you stop working tonight, but I would totally be into seeing you again..."

Ah, young lust. It was almost beautiful, but not quite. I sipped my drink and reluctantly turned my gaze back to the magician.

"Thank you, thank you all," he said thickly, as if he had learned the lingo from an in-chip. "For final trick of mine I will disappear simply. Good night."

He bowed and took a step back. Then he began to, how do I describe it, fade into thin air. It was like nothing I had ever seen before. I tore the optical out of Marcus's fingers and pointed it at Amirahn. The magician turned every shade of red and was gone.

Neat trick.

Marcus left to use the toilet and I scanned the vid of Amirahn's disappearance through the Pattern Lens. He seemed to shift slightly, like all the molecules in his body had been tugged, then turned red. I replayed it back and forth, but it was like nothing I had ever seen before. Trump travel leaves the impression of a flat space, a portal. This guy receded into nothingness.

I was fiddling with the recording when Marcus returned.

"Hey, look who I found?" he boomed.

I looked up. My cousins Rak and Kasca were in tow, along with a

slim dark-haired young man I didn't recognize. Trailing Kasca was his squad of a dozen servants. We shook hands and squeezed around the table. The servants sat at a couple tables nearby. I wondered if we looked as out of place to the other patrons as we were. Kasca was my cousin on both sides. His mother Chara is Maria's older cousin. He had Bleys's light complexion and slick dirty blond hair swept back and cut above his collar. He was nearly six feet tall and had a reputation as a playboy of sorts. We had seen some good times together.

Rak was older than all the rest of my cousins combined and he looked it: grizzled, hunched somewhat, and gone gray. He moved like his bones could shatter at any moment. He was Osric's son and had never been to Amber in my two-hundred odd years among the living.

His young acquaintance he introduced as Furoch. This kid turned out to have a handshake nearly as crushing as Marcus, with long fingernails and eyes that didn't look quite right. As I already had the Pattern up, I checked him out.

He wasn't human.

His molecular structure looked like something out of Chaos, although more stable. He wasn't a Demon, nor a Pit Creature, but I couldn't say with any certainty what he was. Yeah, I needed another mystery.

Marcus was showing Kasca and Rak the vid. At Kasca's request I altered the laws of physics so he could cast a spell. He didn't want a headache, he said. After a moment he shook his head and said that Amirahn was no longer in this Shadow. We talked. They asked the obvious questions. We gave the obvious answers. If anybody knew anything important, they weren't sharing. Okay, so maybe I forgot to mention my suspicions, but I wouldn't put it past either of my cousins to be behind this lousy magician. I knew Rak had connections in at least one of the nearby Shadows, and Kasca pretty much ruled his gangworld Shadow. Add to that their coincidental presence here and things didn't look too good. Me and coincidence are old enemies.

Lacey's Lounge was beginning to bug me. Too many questions, not enough fun. When Kasca suggested we split, I jumped at the chance.

We took the conventional route. Kasca's spaceship was nice and tidy, and it got us to the next watering hole. Hanno's Place was like a spoiled rich kid: all dolled up and looking for trouble. Everybody here seemed mostly human, with piercings, shavings, and who knew what else hiding beneath black black black. The front door was a sea of angry goths. We muscled our way in behind Marcus's broad shoulders. Shrieking and pulsing bass beats boomed from the doorway ahead. The natives were restless and clawed at us.

Kasca seemed right at home. He slipped the Head Doorman a cred stick with instructions that a round of drinks were on him and we were in. People within hearing range cheered and a few clamored for his autograph. He just smiled wearily.

Decor was dark industrial slag junk-metal. Steel walls rattled to the beat. A smell of citrus smoke permeated the place. We followed Kasca through the minefield of what must have been furniture onto the main dance floor. The people inside the club made those waiting outside look like wannabe's; they took every fashion risk to the extreme. Well, except for the black.

Kasca and his servants climbed onto the main stage and began setting up instruments. Marcus crawled behind a percussion kit and started beating away. Rak joined them and pulled out an electro guitar. In a couple moments they were pumping a thousand decibels of urban dance drone through the speakers. People screamed and writhed. Some even danced.

I picked a good spot and watched. Rak's friend Furoch approached me with a drink in each hand. He offered me one.

"Thanks," I said.

"You are most welcome," he replied.

I sipped. It was beer, heavily spiced. Marcus would probably like it here, I decided.

"You are Rak's cousin, correct?" He asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Yes, and Kasca's and Marcus's as well."

"I fail to see much family resemblance, except perhaps that you and Kasca have similar lines here," he pointed at his cheekbones, forehead.

"Mmmm," I agreed. "He and I are related through both sides of the family. And you—do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"None living," he answered. I hesitated, then charged ahead.

"Tell me," I said. "What are you?"

"I wonder if you will believe me."

I looked at him. He seemed to radiate a sort of low cunning. His gestures were efficient and minimal.

"Try me," I suggested. He chuckled.

"I am a dragon."

Interesting company my most-wrinkled cousin was keeping. I let my gaze wander over the pulsing crowd, then return to the stage. My cousins' band went from one extended groove into another, never quite stopping one song before starting the next. They worked well together, although the music was a bit heavy and droning for my tastes—too much repetition and not enough melody. I thought briefly about joining them and adding some funk to their fury but resisted; not the right crowd for it.

A passing waitress refreshed our drinks. Furoch paid.

"What is it like to be a dragon?" I inquired.

"Better to ask me what it is like to be a human," he responded. "I don't ever think about being a dragon. It's natural to me. As a human I feel constricted. As a dragon I can be myself."

"I have known a few dragons," I said.

"Indeed?"

"Yes. They were all rather confident, egotistical even."

"I have often been accused of having an ego," he said affably. "Have you ever met a modest dragon? When you're twenty-five feet long, covered in armored scales, and can breathe fire it's difficult not to have an ego."

"I see. But in the dragons I have known it turned out to be a weakness."

"How so?" he asked.

"There is always something bigger, someone badder." I smiled.

He paused and took a substantial swallow of his beer. We watched the scene. The music shifted to something heavier, more driving.

"There is that," he said finally. "Are you referring to yourself?"

"The dragons I knew are no more."

"Then they were foolish. I am not."

"Perhaps," I nodded slowly to indicate some sort of agreement. "What do you know of Rak's family."

"Not much. I know Kasca somewhat. Rak speaks with a fellow named Rhys from time to time. They live in other worlds."

"Shadows." I said.

"Yes, that is the word he used."

"Does the word 'Amber' mean anything to you?"

"Rak told me that it was where he was born, a kind of pole about which these different worlds spin. He said that his relatives were backstabbing schemers who lived forever or until someone killed them." He looked me boldly in the eye as if daring me to deny it.

"Yeah, that's the gist of the place." I said and sipped my beer. We said nothing more for a time.

I thought back to the events of the evening. The trap had been bluntly set but not sprung. Amirahn, or whoever was behind him, must have wanted me to be at his magic show, but I couldn't discern the reason. Was it a warning? Did he wish to impress me with incompetent magic or merely interest me in his method of disappearing? I had to admit that the red power was something with a great deal of potential non-boringness to it. I wanted to study it more. For a second I wished I hadn't left the laptop computer in Kasca's spaceship. Nah. It was surreptitiously plugged into his mainframe, looking for a weak link in his armor. Either tonight or later I would finish the job myself and give my cousin a pleasant surprise.

The crowd had doubled in size. Everybody waiting outside must have finally gotten in. Marcus kicked up the drumbeat and the volume level rose even further. I made a bubble around myself to control the sound attacking my ears. Furoch must have noticed, for he looked a question at me. I shrugged.

"I'm old," I said. He smiled.

I saw a young woman staring at us. No, she was staring at Furoch. Dressed in a sleek black mini, maybe twenty-five standard years, with dark hair cut just below the ears and a rather exotic look to her. She was studying him from the fringe of the dancers about fifteen feet from where we were standing.

"You have an admirer," I told him.

"Oh?" he said, without looking around. "Describe this admirer please."

I looked at her through the Pattern Lens. She had the same aura Furoch did.

"About twenty feet long, scaly, with a forked tongue," I said. He raised an eyebrow at me. "Toward the bar, in a short black dress."

He turned his head. She raised her chin slightly and looked openly at him.

"Excuse me," he said, setting his half-empty glass upon the tray of a passing waiter.

"Of course."

Furoch went over to the woman. They began dancing slowly, twisting and circling each other in apparent defiance of the up-tempo beat. After a moment, they were swallowed by the crowd.

I finished my beer and placed the glass on a table. Scanning the crowd with the Lens I *Found* a few likely prospects. I started with the one nearest to me. She succumbed to my silent charm and we danced.

Dancing is a good thing. It's a release of energy along the same lines as sex, but with a nobler purpose. Or something like that. My body took over while my mind retreated. The Pattern slipped away. I did too, and worked up a good sweat. I jumped, jerked, and flailed my way through a succession of partners, seeking one with that certain something. Even Shadow-dwellers can occasionally have that indescribable spark of vitality that distinguishes the extraordinary from the ordinary. I seek it wherever I go; it relieves the boredom.

Shadows get old, they take on the same features. Eventually nearly everyone reminds you of someone you knew long ago. There are only so many colors in the rainbow. I have painted vast collections with each of them alone and in every conceivable combination, so to speak. Very little of the truly novel exists, even in infinite speculation.

Furoch might qualify. He certainly stood out, if only for his association with Rak. Why was he hanging around the old guy? Was he his pet? Was he some sort of familiar? I knew that Rak dabbled in sorcery. Perhaps in his home Shadow a familiar helped him with his spells. Their relationship seemed more based on teamwork. Rak didn't order Furoch around at all, and the dragon guy seemed free to do whatever he wanted. At least he was a decent conversationalist. Plus it didn't hurt to have a fire-

breather on our side.

Kasca's lone female servant was staking a place for herself in the center of the dance floor. I thought for a moment before remembering. Her name was Bronwyn. With long brown hair and a sheer plastel dress over black silk underwear, she stood out even in this crowd. She whirled and twirled. Several men and a couple women approached her and tried to keep up with her pace. They all retreated exhausted eventually. I entertained a thought of taking her on myself.

Just then a large square man in an out-of-place Nehru suit burst out of the circle surrounding her. He had short silvery hair and sported mirror shades. Amirahn! I pushed through the masses to get at him. He grabbed Bronwyn's hand, spun her to him, then pushed her away. She turned a complete circle, her dress billowing out. Just as I got within striking range Amirahn hunched back into the other dancers, shifted to red and vanished.

Damn! I looked all over the floor but he was gone. Up on stage Kasca caught my eye and jerked his head toward Bronwyn with a questioning look. I nodded and made my way over to her.

She hadn't even stopped dancing. What balls! Or whatever passes for them in the female of the species. When she saw me approach she shuffled over and writhed around me, running her fingers down my scaleskin-covered thigh.

"Hey handsome, wanna dance?" Her sly smile intrigued me. We danced, although it is an inadequate word to describe the communications our bodies described to each other. Time passed. Hours, I think. I cared not.

The party moved outside toward Kasca's ship. Whatever minimal amount of restraint we had collectively exercised in Hanno's place vanished. Everyone was laughing and joking. Marcus had two wild women under each arm and still managed to carry a mug full of spiced beer without spilling much. Furoch and his Dragon Lady were keeping to themselves. Around Kasca and Rak there was a group of perhaps thirty including all of Kasca's

servants.

Well, all of them except one. Bronwyn held my hand with the promise of unimagined pleasures. Okay, imagined pleasures, as I was busy doing at that moment.

We filed down the gangway following Kasca to the ship's main entrance. Suddenly the procession stopped. Kasca reached up and tore a piece of paper off the portal's window.

"A parking ticket!" He wailed. "Damn! They got me the last time too." He shoved the offending paper in his pocket and palmed the passlock. The portal opened. Everyone filed in.

Electro-dance music blared, drinks got drunk, and clothing flew in every direction. Kasca played the host to the hilt, ordering his servants around and fondling a few feminine forms. Furoch and his newfound friend were screeching and roaring from some nook loud enough to occasionally punctuate the party. Rak reclined on a low couch and several ladies took turns feeding him grapes. It was a groovy scene except for my large blond cousin.

Marcus had been naked from the moment we stepped into the main chamber. His big ass was pumping away at some young lady visible only as arms and legs reaching around his rippling bulk. Another naked woman clung to his back, somehow managing to keep hold of him as she bounced along in rhythm. Two other women pushed and shoved trying to get underneath Marcus. Kasca mentioned a method to isolate Marcus's group from the rest of the party. Blondie's sex energy was overwhelming. He jumped off the woman he was on and moved to the next one. And again. I got tired just looking at him

Bronwyn revived me. We were discreet.

Morning came eventually, long after the rest of us had. I milled about, stretched, and sucked down two steaming mugs of kava. After I was sufficiently revived, I noticed a strange sight.

In the middle of the main chamber, Marcus's prone form was lying

on the floor. He appeared to be sleeping. The four women he had entertained were all awake, naked, and straining at some sort of invisible barrier that apparently surrounded them all. They pounded at the air and contorted their lovely faces into hideous visages of begging and pleading. I was familiar with my cousin's loud snoring and supposed that they must not have gotten any sleep all night.

Kasca saw the situation and stepped over to a wall decorated with control panels of various kinds. He put his hand upon the lever marked "Force Field" and pulled it down.

In an instant the four women streaked naked from the chamber, screaming and cursing out the main portal in an angry blur. They were followed immediately by a wave of hideous stench. Marcus stirred, mumbled something, and farted again. I covered my nose and saw the sleeping forms of the rest of the partygoers awaken with looks of sheer horror on their faces. Kasca quickly punched a button and sweet-smelling air flooded the cabin.

Marcus sat up. He was totally naked except for the nearly empty mug still clenched in his hand. He smiled down in the general direction of his groin, chuckled smugly to himself, then drained the rest of the beer in one swallow. When he tried to stand, he swayed and crashed into an unlucky servant who went flying. Marcus stood groggily and clutched his face with one meaty hand.

"Ugh," he grimaced. "Where clothes?" He leaned over, grabbed one of the escaped women's leather strap-harness things and stepped into it. Pulling it over his shoulder he got his arm caught in the bustier and just stood there looking foolish. I dispensed a couple sobriety pills from the replicator and passed them to Marcus along with a glass of water. He gulped them down and instantly his demeanor changed. He straightened up, looked quickly at his outfit.

"Aaah! Dude! What am I wearing?" he yelled.

Marcus tore the strap-harness off and began searching for his clothes.

I turned back to the replicator and called up an enormous breakfast of hashbrowns, garden omelettes, gallons of orange juice and all the extras for the group of us. I sat down near the main console next to my hidden laptop and devoured the food. Pretty soon, everybody was eating. The

servants cleared everything away and began cleaning up the place. I leaned back and relaxed.

Rak was still on the couch, surfing local vid broadcasts on the overhead screen. He paused at the news. Apparently there had been a major electrical storm and subsequent fire at Hanno's Place early this morning. They showed pictures of it and about a third of the main room was draped in molten slag and wires. Repair work was already underway.

Kasca was frowning over a spread of his Trump cards. I glanced at the scrye. It didn't look particularly encouraging, some ultimate combination of sorrow and new knowledge. I was tempted to ask him what his question had been. Maybe my magic Eight-ball could give us an answer. I brought it out and held if for a few seconds, but I couldn't think of a good question. Kasca scooped up his deck and tucked it into his belt pouch. Then he pulled out some sketching materials and started drawing something.

I pulled up the laptop and studied the vid of Amirahn. Kasca peered over my shoulder from time to time. Marcus finally finished his typically gargantuan morning meal and sauntered over.

"Hey," Kasca said. "How does that guy's disappearance compare to Trump travel?"

I considered it for a moment before replying. As Kasca was our generation's Trump artist, I would have expected him to be more knowledgeable about the subject than the rest of us. Looking at his face, however, it seemed an honest question.

"Somewhat the same, only a different flavor." I mused. "Also, this red fading technique seems to recede in space, whereas Trump travel is much more abrupt."

Kasca nodded.

"Red is one end of the visible spectrum," he added. "Whereas Trump extends beyond the visible in all directions." Rak and Furoch joined us in discussing the finer points of Amirahn's exit versus our family's preferred method of traveling.

"Why don't we film somebody Trumping out and compare the two?" Marcus suggested. "I gotta be getting back anyway." We all looked at him. Hey, he wasn't stupid, just thick.

So Marcus got his mug and Trumped off and we captured it on the

laptop's vid camera. The little computer analyzed the data and printed up a few charts comparing Trump travel to the red fade effect. We didn't glean anything from it, but more data couldn't hurt.

Kasca finished his sketch of Amirahn. Yeah, it looked like the guy, if a bit stylized. I mean, the guy was way uglier than the pic. Anyway, my cousin took the sketch over to a low table and gave some instructions to one of his servants.

I called up the interface to the ship via my laptop. Kasca's system was primed for a good host program. I gave him Bertha: motherly, with a little bit of take charge and a whole lot of soul. From now on, his ship would talk back in a deep woman's sassy voice and if it shucked and jived a bit instead of strictly following directions it would only make his life more interesting. "Never boring," I always say.

Kasca yelped and the paper he was holding exploded in a fury of pulsing and glowing reddish tendrils. He dropped the sketch as it crumbled to ashes. The red things snaked all over the room as everyone scrambled to avoid them. Fairly quickly the spooky crimson ropes settled into circling Rak, Kasca and I. I had my dagger out just in case, but they didn't seem aggressive, just curious. Three flew around me, hovering primarily between eye-level and waist high.

If Amirahn's power could usurp Trump we were in a whole lot of trouble.

One of the servants stabbed one of the tendrils and it instantly glowed redder, then faded away. At Kasca's order, the servant quickly began knifing the others. Before he got to me, I reached out to touch one. My hand passed through it with no sensation or reaction on the part of the tendril at all.

All of this was captured on vid. I would review it later, I thought, as Kasca's servants finished dispatching the red tendrils. Maybe having a dozen well-trained servants wasn't such a bad idea. Nah, they would cramp my style. Growing up, I never liked having one of my cousins tagging around me at the Courts. Servants wouldn't be much different.

I stood up, slung the computer strap over my shoulder and stretched. The day was plodding onward all across the universes. It had been fun.

"My dear cousin," I began, "It has been delightful, but I must be on my way. I thank you for your hospitality."

"You're welcome," Kasca said.

I glanced at Bronwyn. Her eyes crinkled up slightly in a ghost of a smile. I gave her a small nod and silent wishes of happiness. I shook my hair free of the tie, smoothed my shirt, and shuffled through my Trump deck. I selected a card of an ordinary-looking man in gold and gray, seated at a desk covered with papers and desk-things. He had curly brown hair shot through with silver cut just above his collar and a short graying beard. Contact came after a few moments.

"Who is it?" I heard.

"Your favorite nephew," I answered. I heard a chuckle, then saw my mother's cousin Davvaldric. He was in his office in the administrative wing of the Citadel.

"You're not really my nephew, you know," he said warmly.

"A technicality. May I come through?"

"Of course."

He extended his hand. I took it. Just then I heard Kasca's voice, cut short.

"What in the—?" he yelled.

"Hey little man," Bertha boomed out of all the ships' speakers in that deep drawl I had programmed. "I like the way you touch me. We are going to be goooood friends. Kiss-kiss, honey-punkin."

Kasca was seated at the main controls of his ship, his face turned to me in astonishment. I gave him a jaunty wave and stepped through the Trump contact. A good performer always leaves the audience wanting more.

Sitting in that little office always made me feel fenced in. Uncle Dav loved his position as the House Secretary to the Courts' Imperial Senate, but just being around all that paperwork made my skin crawl. We went for a stroll in the Senate's Ways.

We strolled through the Cliff's Edge Gardens, then seated ourselves on a small bench beside a waterfall of changing colors. I filled him in on my latest comings and goings, knowing he would tell my mother everything.

She and I had come to some sort of understanding about thirty years ago: if she stayed out of my life, I would let her keep tabs on me through Davvaldric. It had worked pretty well and I hadn't actually spoken to dear old Maria in nearly a dozen years.

After my uncle returned to his office, I continued to stare at the shifting, cascading water and let my mind wander. I had known a magician once who used to disappear at the end of every gig. He used smoke and mirrors, and had limited success in larger venues. Amirahn hadn't relied upon any gimmick; he had really disappeared. It seemed like some sort of trans-Shadow sorcery, but that was supposed to be impossible even with a Real Power. So perhaps he had some big bad-ass cross-universe energy source at his disposal. He was probably a major player himself. Did I want to find him? I wasn't so sure. He seemed perfectly capable of finding us in Hanno's place. Granted, from Nelan's Rock one could travel to any of nine different Shadows. Maybe Amirahn could traverse Shadow and maybe he couldn't. If he were stuck in the vicinity of the Nine Worlds then at least he was contained. Somehow I doubted that was the case.

More importantly, what did he want? Was he connected to some ongoing scheme in the Courts or in the Castle? Anything was possible, and I really didn't have enough information to formulate a hypothesis. In any case, the method of his disappearance was novel enough to merit being brought to Ellyrio's attention. She had seen more of life's quirks than anyone else I knew personally, albeit vicariously. Plus if sufficiently flattered she might deign to enlighten me. I withdrew her Trump and studied it.

Before me was the image of a slender woman taking shelter beneath a large Crowntop tree. Behind her a thunderstorm was approaching; flashes of lightning struck the ground, reflecting off her pale skin and long copper hair bound between her shoulder blades with a gold clasp. She wore a simple ankle-length cream-colored silk dress that hugged her sensual figure. Her bare feet nestled in the dark grass. On her face was an enigmatic expression. She was looking back toward the approaching clouds with an indescribable expression: hunger, anticipation, revulsion, fear—it seemed different each time I studied it.

She had been much younger when this was painted, maybe four millennia ago. To think of her as a barefoot girl playing tag with a storm was

almost unimaginable. I put her Trump away; she never answered.

Most places in the Courts were accessible from the Senate Ways. I started down the path that would eventually lead me to the D'al Szoli Ways, the only place I knew of from which my great aunt's Ways were accessible. Three turnings and ten minutes later I saw a couple approaching on the garden path. It was Senator Melran Gaerron with a young man on his arm. The senator wore the Gaerron green and dark brown uniform including the obligatory parade saber. The young man was dressed in a light green doublet and in black and dark brown striped breeches laced over short boots. At his belt was a decorative dagger. I removed my hat and stood by to let them pass. The senator nodded his head at me and seemed inclined to keep going, but the young man tugged on his arm and they stopped.

"Excuse me, my lord," he said to me, perhaps ten feet from where I stood. "But have we met?" His brown eyes were curious and young. He had short dark brown hair framing a round face. I put his age at perhaps twenty.

"I do not believe I have had that honor, young sir." I glanced at the Senator, who frowned but gave me a slight nod. "I am Adréano, son of Maria D'al Szoli." I shook his hand formally.

"Verend Gaerron, son of Balram and Jeyna Gaerron."

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." I released his hand and stepped back. He studied me intently for a moment.

"I have heard of you. Ahh!" He smiled at me suddenly, as if remembering something. "Your father is from Amber."

"Yes," I nodded. "My father is Prince Caine."

"I knew it." He beamed at the senator, who frowned again. "I would love to hear about Amber sometime, my lord. I have always wondered what life was like at the other end of the universe."

I felt a momentary pang of pity for him then. House Gaerron was notoriously militant, and most likely his future involved fighting and dying young in some petty Black Zone squabble.

"I would be most pleased to tell you what I know of Amber. One day I may take you there myself, although it is forbidden until the Embassy has an official residence."

"Yes, I know. Still, I shall call on you soon. Do you reside within

the D'al Szoli Ways?"

"Yes," I admitted, "although I am rarely in the Courts."

"Oh," he exclaimed. "I am going to take the Logrus soon. When I finish, perhaps I shall come looking for you in Shadow." At this Senator Melran stepped briskly forward and cleared his throat.

"We must be getting along," the senator intoned, somehow managing to frown as he said it.

"Well, I look forward to seeing you again, Lord D'al Szoli." They began walking off down the path.

"Farewell, Lord Gaerron. Senator." I said and watched them go. I wondered if Verend would survive the Ordeal. He was so young and enthusiastic, it didn't seem likely.

As I was ushered into her Chamber of Whispers, Ellyrio stood gracefully and held out her hands for me to kiss. She wore a sleeveless knee-length dress the coppery color of her hair and her feet were bare. I crossed the room, took her hands in mine, and kissed them. She smiled warmly and motioned toward a low divan. I sat and looked around.

This room was famous in the Courts, perhaps even more so than Ellyrio herself. Glass alembics, beakers, and globes of all shapes and sizes filled every inch of wall space and jutted out into the room. They hung suspended in an elaborate iron rack, all connected by wires, tubing, and other things. There was barely enough space for one person to move among them. Every container held some fluid and I knew that somehow my great aunt gleaned information from the various liquids' movements. Shadows, enemies, friends—everything she knew of was reflected here. In the center of the room were a small couch and a low stone table. On the table was a decanter full of an emerald green liquid and two long-stemmed glasses. I was seated on a divan to the side of the table, close to one end of the couch. The iron and glass apparatus surrounded us. I couldn't help but wonder which globe described me. She followed my appraising gaze and shook her head slightly.

"Ask not," she said. "I cannot reveal the secrets of the whisper-globes. To do so would negate the sorceries which make them useful."

"I understand, aunt, and would never presume."

"Tell me," she said as she reclined upon the couch, "what brings you here today?"

I poured us each a glass of verlait and told her my story.

The Lady of Whispers is almost mythical within the Courts of Chaos. As nominal head of House D'al Szoli, she has offices and chambers at the Citadel, but she has never visited them. Indeed, Ellyrio has not been seen outside of her Ways in over a thousand years.

Many have heard of her legendary romance with Duke Hiram Minobee—two young lovers from houses at war with each other. Their love burned brightly until they were found out and forbidden to see each other. He subsequently devoted his life to conquest and was rumored to have never had another lover. His exploits at the Battle of Far Edge and in the War of Three Arrows earned him the Iron Serpent, the highest medal of honor bestowed by the King. His death in the Great Black Road War was a great loss.

Lady Ellyrio D'al Szoli retreated as well and devoted her days to the study of the arcane arts. Her Ways are unparalleled in their design and beauty, and her sorceries are feared throughout the Black Zone and beyond. My great aunt has never spoken of the Duke to me.

When I had finished my tale Ellyrio stared silently at me for several moments. It was an unnerving experience, although not unexpected. I sipped my drink and tried to appear calm. Finally, she set her glass down and asked a question.

"Why do you practice magic?"

I thought for a minute or two before answering. My great aunt was a woman of very precise articulation; if she had meant to say "sorcery," she would have used the word.

"I enjoy the mundane aspect of illusions, the deception of the eye

using only my physical self to accomplish the task," I said. "It is the very absence of true Power that makes it so appealing to me—the fact that a mere Shadow-dweller has the potential to be my equal or even my better. It motivates me."

"And the audience?" she suggested.

"Of course, my lady." I mimed a bow. "I relish being in front of an audience. Their avid interest energizes me. In fact, the best thing about performing is absorbing the rush of emotion from the spectators. It's unlike anything else."

She smiled slowly at me, sitting quite still. Around us, the liquids flowed and ebbed in their many containers. My eye was drawn to a sphere containing azure and violet liquids that shifted but didn't mix. As I watched, the azure fluid filled the container and began percolating. It exited in bubbles via a different tube. In a few seconds only the violet liquid remained. I imagined that it made some sort of sense to me, as if I knew what message it contained. I sat quietly, waiting for my aunt to enlighten me.

It was a long wait before I realized that she already had.

I thanked her, kissed her outstretched hand, and exited that room of mysteries. My great aunt's questions had prompted me to figure out the first part of the puzzle. Amirahn wanted us to find him, to watch his tricks. Fuck that. I didn't give a lizard's left one for what he wanted, even if he could control the Creepy Crimson Crap power. I Trumped Marcus.

"Dude?" he responded.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Um, Arden."

Close enough. I grinned broadly and held up my open hand. Marcus reached out and I stepped from one end of the universe to another. My mind buzzed with possibilities and preparations. If Mister Magnificent wanted me to observe his performance, he would have to sing and dance on my stage.

He would have to come to Amber.

Chapter 2

Lush green trees, soaring dark canopy, verdant shafts of light—this

was the primeval forest called Arden. Hawks shrieked high overhead, deer coursed swiftly through the dim recesses, and no doubt billions of creepy-crawly insects were swarming under my feet even as I stood face to chest with Marcus. Ugh. I couldn't suppress a shiver.

"Dude, you okay?" Marcus released my hand as the Trump contact faded around us.

"Yeah, yeah," I ran my hand through my hair. "Just a little spooked, that's all."

"What, did something happen?"

"Nah. It's this place. It's so..."

"Awesome?" Marcus suggested. He inhaled deeply and grinned.

"Um, yeah." I nodded in false agreement. "That's exactly the word I was looking for." I *Found* a charm of extra-strength bug repellent and slipped it into my pouch.

"What's up?"

We walked toward what passed for civilization in this place, Marcus leading his horse. I told him of my idea to draw Amirahn to Amber.

"Can you help me?" I asked.

"Sorry, man." He shook his head. "Captain 'J' has stepped up patrols. We're finding weird stuff all over the forest. But call me if there's a scrap." He grinned his huge grin and punched my shoulder way too hard.

Twenty minutes of walking got us into one of Julian's perimeter camps. I borrowed a horse, waved goodbye to Marcus, and set out at a brisk trot. Thankfully, no swarms of bugs attacked me as I passed through miles of tree-lined roads and a couple more ranger camps. I emerged a few hours later into the late-afternoon sun alongside the river Oisen. My horse and I followed the swift-moving water down into the Vale of Garnath and slept soundly in a real bed in a picturesque roadside inn.

I was awake and on the road before the sun rose, eager to speak with the King. Four hours later I took the side road toward the castle. The city of Amber stretched out below me as I climbed the lower slopes of Kolvir.

In another two hours I was ensconced in my quarters in the castle, soaking in a mint bath and sipping a lime rallado. "Cleanliness is better than boringness," I said brightly. My reverie was disturbed by the

unmistakable sound of my door slamming open. In a matter of milliseconds, His Majesty Random, King of Amber, stood before me, hands on his hips, nodding.

"Adréano," he grunted, "You were supposed to wait in my receiving chamber!"

"I left word to summon me when Your Maj—"

"Don't give me that shit. I'm the King; you wait for me. That's the way it works around here." He turned a chair around and straddled it backwards.

"Of course your Majesty." I bowed from the head and gestured to the carafe. "Would you care for—"

"Hey. Is this that lime thing you make? Don't mind if I do." He grabbed the carafe and chugged directly from it. "Ahhh. Good stuff. You gotta give us the recipe. So, report."

I told him of my recent history, from Mezzone to Amber, leaving out only the details of my sojourn in the Courts. Apparently he had heard about most of it already and was only interested in a couple things.

"What did you do with the body of the punk that attacked you?"

"I left it in the alley."

He grimaced. "Bad move. Always bring the bodies back. Evidence, you know."

I apologized and told him of my idea to lure Amirahn to Amber. He shook his head and polished off the rallado.

"Nah, that ain't gonna happen. Too risky. Tell you what, though. I'll ask Fiona to look into it. Maybe she can shed some light on this guy. In the meantime, you should check in with Bleys's kid. Apparently this Amirahn guy has been busy lately."

"What—"

"I gotta run. Thanks for the cola. Oh, and Adréano…"

"Yes?" I prompted. Random wiggled the container back and forth in his hand.

"If left out too long, lime juice gets real sticky. It's hard to get the glass clean. So wash this out quickly." He dropped the nearly empty carafe in my bathwater, smiled smugly, and strolled out of my chambers.

After recovering from the King's veto of my plan and his pungent

addition to my bathwater, I dressed in Amberesque attire and visited the kitchens. Ten minutes later and carrying enough sandwiches to withstand a major siege, I strolled out of the castle and around the side of the mountain to Corwin's cenotaph. Looking at it made me wonder what Corwin would say if he ever saw it again. To say the place had changed would have been a drastic understatement.

Marcus had constructed walls of limestone to fill the gaps between the columns. He had insulated the interior with plastered walls. The front and back doors were heavy oak bound in iron and opened by a sorcerous trick that Fiona had keyed to our bloods. Supposedly only Marcus, Kasca, Emilëa, Martin, Rhys and I could open the doors. However, I had seen Fi in there more than once and I expect she fixed it so Random could enter too.

But not Corwin. Yeah, that simple fact would have been deliciously ironic if only the guy hadn't been missing-presumed-dead for a couple hundred years.

I placed my hand against the plate next to the door. It tingled uncomfortably for a split second before the latch clicked. I turned the handle and entered our generation's headquarters.

The inside had been even more radically changed than the outside. The walls were lined with shelves of papers, books, and miscellaneous crap we had collected from Shadow. The far corner held a couple ice boxes and a steam-operated coffee maker Kasca had dragged in. It took up way too much space, but after Marcus "accidentally" broke the first machine, Kasca installed a similar one that was significantly bigger and clunkier. We all got the hint.

The center of the space was occupied by chairs, desks, a couple stuffed recliners, a couch, and piles of odds and ends. Emilëa had hung up some old tapestries to hide the bare walls and help retain some of the heat. The place was still freezing in winter, but it was mostly tolerable at other times of the year.

As I sauntered in, Fiona's daughter swiveled in her chair to coldly regard me over her reading spectacles.

"Undoubtedly," she said, "You have some dilemma, crisis, or puzzle that needs solving right now. However, I will be unable to assist you as I am

already committed to helping Martin and Rhys with a most vexing conundrum in the Golden Circle." She swiveled back to her desk with a crisp precision.

"Hello to you too." I shut the door behind me and walked to the corner to put the food away. "If you don't want to hear the King's orders, that's fine by me." I perused the bulletin board for recent notes, but there was only Kasca's usual drivel in his crabbed handwriting. It said "T.K.P.A." It probably wasn't anything important, but I stuck it in my pocket.

"Adréano," my cousin scolded me, "I'll not be tricked into solving your petty problems for you."

"Of course not," I smiled warmly at her. "Forget I said anything."

"Hmph," she frowned and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "You had better start at the beginning."

So I recounted my tale once again, purposefully leaving out a few details so Emi could ask me about them and feel important. I was able to answer all of her questions except one.

"Why didn't you keep the body?"

Ten minutes of conversation and one admission of a mistake later, she agreed to investigate the strange symbol. Given her incredible talent for boring, tedious, mind-numbing work like research, I was glad it was her and not me. She hauled a step-stool to a shelf full of papers and began rooting around in the piles.

I plopped down at my desk and wondered what to do next. Luckily, I didn't have to reach a decision. Instead, I got a Trump call. It was Kasca.

"Greetings, cousin." He was dressed as dapper as ever in a silk tuxedo jacket. His golden-red hair was slicked back perfectly. And yet, something didn't look quite exact.

"Yes, Kasca," I said. "How may I help you?"

"Are you at HQ? Good. I want to come through."

"Is there anything else I should know beforehand?" With Kasca, it was always a good idea to ask.

"Um, Furoch is coming with me."

"Anyone else?"

"Nah."

"Anything else?" I continued. I had Trumped him earlier and asked

him to retrieve the corpse of the lectro that attacked me on Mezzone.

He thought for a moment, looking as innocent as a newborn baby.

"Nope. Bring us through and I'll tell you about it." He extended his hand and I brought him through. Furoch came along, still in his human form. He thanked me and made a silent scan of the room. It seemed like he was categorizing everything in the place in his mind. I wondered if he intended to clean up the messes. Rak's associate introduced himself to Emilëa and kissed her hand. She almost blushed.

"No corpse on Mezzone," Kasca explained, "but Furoch got some info."

"Yes," the dragon said. "The Alley in question contained traces of scent very similar to Amirahn's. However, they were not concentrated in the specific areas, but were dispersed."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"A humanoid body's scent is mostly contained within its particular outline. Your dead opponent's scent was spread nearly evenly over most of the city block."

"And what does that mean?" I asked again.

"It means," Furoch said, "That your corpse wasn't a normal humanoid. His 'body' was much more fluid than one would expect."

I still didn't know what that meant, but I quit asking Draco to clarify. Shit! Now I really regretted not bringing the body back. It didn't help that Emilëa's eyes were burning guilty holes right through me.

"We saw the Magician guy again," Kasca interrupted my thoughts. "We nearly took him down, too."

"Really? How?"

"Sorcery." He strolled over to the coffee machine and began turning the large crank. "Rak and I tracked him from Hanno's Place to Karlur IV in the Nev Dominion Shadow."

"Wait, why did you start at Hanno's?"

"'Cause that's where Amirahn started the fire." Having set the gears in motion, Kasca twisted some knobs and set about making coffee.

"You left that part out."

"Well," he said, "a couple of hours after we left, all of the musical equipment in the joint turned on by itself at full blast. Witnesses said they

saw our guy messing around at the boards. Everything overloaded and boom: instant fire."

"Why would he do that?"

"I have no idea. But Rak was able to tail him in his ship. The Magician was waiting for us on the planet."

"And then what happened?"

Kasca's smile lit up the entire room.

"A whhhhhhhhole lot of sorcery," he said proudly.

"You fought him?" I asked.

"Yeah, me and Rak, for almost two hours. Whoa. It was the biggest fireworks show ever."

"And you said you almost got him?"

"Um, yeah." He glanced quickly at Furoch. The dragon was staring back at him, unblinking. "Or, sorta."

Furoch continued to stare at him. A drop of sweat trickled down Kasca's forehead.

"Well, not quite," he admitted. "But there was an assload of explosions. You know the Loranian swamp on Karlur IV?"

"Yeah," I said. "The place with the translucent frog-birds."

"Not any more. It's the Loranian *desert* now." His laugh was contagious and we all joined in. Emilëa was the first to recover.

"Kasca," she scolded him, "Surely you realize that your accidental birth as a near-immortal doesn't give you the right to eliminate entire species of Shadow creatures—"

"Hey! I wasn't an accident."

"—and furthermore, you have a responsibility to the lesser beings of this multiverse, blah blah blah..." While she droned on, I approached Furoch and got more of the story. Kasca had told most of the truth, omitting only the end. Rak and Kasca had fought Amirahn, and had him on the defensive for most of the battle. However, Kasca had forgotten to mention that he and Rak had fled the planet of Karlur IV under a hail of arcane energy. I mentioned this to Kasca and he sheepishly agreed.

"Yeah," he said. "The guy started using my own spells against me—and I got some kick-ass spells! We had to run away."

"But he didn't pursue you?" I asked.

"Nah. Rak took me back to my ship and he went home. I followed him and picked up scaly-skin here." He pointed at Furoch. "We stopped in Mezzone, then I called you. You know, it seems old Rak is out of the game for now."

"What?" Emilëa said.

"He's retired or something," Kasca replied.

"Mister Rak has decided to concentrate his efforts on his homeworld for the time being," Furoch said. "He does not wish to be drawn into this incident any further."

"What about you?" I asked.

"Me?" Furoch smiled slightly. "I am curious as to your kind. This Amirahn creature seems to present a challenge to you. I am interested in seeing how you respond. For instance, I wonder why you smell faintly of lime."

"Long story," I said. "If you joined us, would you be an observer or a participant?"

"Yeah, could we count on you in a fight?" Kasca added.

Furoch turned his head and looked slyly at us. "I shall of course defend myself, but I see no reason to attack the man outright."

"Not even after he attacked Rak and Kasca?" Emilëa asked.

"Um, actually..." Kasca stared intently at his shoes and rubbed his chin. "*Technically* speaking, we might have attacked Amirahn first."

Furoch nodded as if he knew all of this and was merely waiting for Kasca to admit it.

"But the guy was definitely hostile," Kasca blurted. "He led us to this place and practically ambushed us."

"Anything else—anything relevant?" Emi asked.

Bleys's son said he didn't think so, but if he remembered anything he would tell us. Right. Kasca filled a large mug of coffee and took a sip. We all gathered around and he poured us each a mug. The conversation wandered over various topics: Rhys and Martin were having diplomatic complications in the Golden Circle. I relayed what Marcus had told me about Julian having increased the patrols in Arden due to inexplicable strangenesses. Emilëa had checked with Gérard and Llewella; she said that the seas were relatively safe, or at least not noticeably different.

It made me wonder what we didn't know. Everything seemed to be falling apart at once. Three days ago life had been normal. Now we were being assaulted on several fronts at once.

Or maybe assaulted wasn't the correct term. We were being probed, tested, and scouted. That made me nervous. I would have preferred an obvious enemy to the nebulous escape artist that Amirahn seemed to be. Was he responsible for all of our problems? It seemed unlikely at best.

Emilëa showed Furoch around the cenotaph. He seemed especially interested in the decorations. Kasca and I talked and discovered we agreed upon something.

We needed more information.

Kasca and I took one of his Trump shortcuts to his homeworld. We charged up his ship and zoomed off into space. Contrary to my expectations, he loved Bertha. He said it gave his ship more character.

"Why are we going to this place again?" I asked. I had agreed to do Kasca a favor, but he was rather vague on the specifics.

"It's especially resistant to Trump," he said. "And I haven't been able to get there on my own. I need you to fix the rules so we can fly there."

"You couldn't draw a sketch of the tower from Random's description?"

"Nah. And for some reason, he's reluctant to let me mind-probe him for more details. I was gonna ask Brand, but..." He shrugged and we both chuckled.

"Yes, but..."

"I have a hunch," he said. I let it go at that. Having Kasca owe me a favor wasn't such a bad thing. Maybe I could get the truth out of him for once.

So we soared into the not-too-empty blackness that comprised most of the area between planets. Shadow-shifting in outer space is both easier and harder than doing it while landbound. It's easier because changing one little thing will usually result in a radical shift. It's harder for the same reason.

Precision was critically important.

Kasca shifted us as close as he could get without my help. Then I had to maintain the likelihood that Kasca's ship would continue to function contrary to the laws of the current Shadow.

"What exactly is the power source of this ship?" I asked.

"Warm fusion," he replied.

"What's that?"

"It's like cold fusion, only not so cold."

I gave up trying to get a straight answer and concentrated on maintaining the existing laws of physics within the confines of the machinery. Kasca piloted us forward and continued to change the scenic details. After nearly two hours of nonstop shifting in weird directions we had some floating rocks but no tower. The ship was bucking every few seconds, so I signaled to him to land it. He set us down on a large floater and we disembarked to look around.

The floating rocks were black against a black sky and they stretched on in all directions as far as I could see. Smoke, flame, and stinking vapors burst forth from various caves and holes. It was pretty much as Random had described it except for the low-level stench.

Unfortunately, there was no tower.

I couldn't remember any of the specifics, but Kasca had studied Corwin's books and thought he knew exactly how to get us where we wanted to go. Following my cousin's directions, I nudged rocks for fifteen minutes until we were moving toward a hill of sorts upon which sat a dark tower. It wasn't as easy as it should have been; the rocks had a bit of natural resistance to Pattern energy.

"Hey," I snapped my fingers at a memory. "Wasn't there some sort of guardian?"

"Yeah, a big glowing snake wrapped around the base. Here," he said and handed me a pair of semi-opaque goggles. I put them on. Kasca put a pair of goggles on himself. "These will reduce the glare so you're not blinded by its evil serpentine light." As he said the last three words he looked like some sort of mad scientist. He coalesced the image in my mind with a spooky, sinister laugh.

"And some sort of mooks in the tower itself?" I asked.

"Um, I forgot about them. But I'm sure we can take 'em."

"And the snake at the same time?" I was beginning to doubt that my cousin had truly considered all of the angles.

"Maybe we should kill the snake first, just to be safe."

"The same snake that Random couldn't kill?" I asked.

"Yeah. That's our snake."

We argued as our rock taxi floated slowly closer. Kasca felt that Random's reliance upon his sword was a mistake. He believed that his sorcery, powered with Trump, should be able to either destroy the beast outright or at least transport it to one of his specially-designed prison Shadows. It seemed a dubious argument at best, given our lack of knowledge about the rules of sorcery and Trump in this place. He agreed, so we decided to test it. First I altered the rules to enable it, then he fired off a blast of arcane energy.

It worked. He obliterated a large floating rock into smaller rocks.

As we wafted toward the tower, I remembered the note on the bulletin board. I took it out of my pocket and showed it to Kasca.

"Secret message?" I asked.

"You'll figure it out," he said smugly.

It took me a few seconds, but given Kasca's superiority complex where Trump was concerned, it wasn't really that difficult.

"Tee, Kay, Pee, Ay. 'Trump Kicks Pattern's Ass,'" I said. He smiled.

"Can I quote you on that?"

"Oh no," I smiled back at him. My diamond ring instantly became a sword, held firmly in my hand and pointing vaguely at Kasca.

"Violence is the first resort of the incompetent," he said haughtily. "I'm very disappointed."

"I'm only defending myself."

"What? From whom?"

"From you," I said and concentrated, "When you discover that "

"Aaaaggggghh!" He screamed and took a couple stagger steps.

"—I've turned Trump off in this particular Shadow."

He dropped to his knees and grabbed at his hair.

"No, not now! I need the power for my spells, to defend us from

the snake!"

"Then I guess you had better apologize."

"You're crazy." He glanced over his shoulder at the approaching tower. It was still almost a mile away, but getting closer with every passing second. "You'll get us both killed. We can't Trump out of here now."

"Perhaps you should have thought of that before writing the note. Apologize."

"No, you'll cave. You wouldn't—Aaaagghh!"

I muted the laws of sorcery as well. Evidently, Kasca had noticed.

"Okay, I apologize. I apologize."

"Say it."

"Pattern Kicks Trump's Ass," he complied.

"There there. That wasn't so difficult, was it?"

"Turn it back on, now." He was panting.

"Certainly, right after you put it in writing." I *Found* a scroll of parchment and a quill dipped in ink. They fell to the rock floor in front of Kasca. He looked angry but defeated, and he scribbled out the note. I took my time reading it, letting the ink dry. Then I rolled it up and slid it into an inside jacket pocket.

"Why Kasca," I noted as my sword returned to its normal place as a ring on my finger. "I believe this is the only time I've ever seen your hair messed up."

"Please!" He begged. I sighed, wallowing in the moment. I love it when they beg. I concentrated for a moment and allowed Trump and sorcery to resume their Adréano-enhanced places in the metaphysical structure of things. Kasca took a deep breath, stood, and turned toward the tower, finally seeing what I had noticed a few minutes earlier.

"There's no serpent," he said. I just smiled.

Soon enough, our rock crunched into the big, hilly rock. We disembarked and began climbing toward the tower. No hook-handed men emerged to attack us. In fact, we were able to enter the dark stone building and take a casual look around. We saw splinters of wood, some dust bunnies, and two pair of rusty manacles. If not for the historical value, this place would have been completely worthless. Once we were certain there weren't any surprises hiding in the nooks and crannies, we scouted around the outside.

Kasca knelt down and picked up something shiny and long just as I detected something disturbing. Someone had just nudged the entire Shadow.

"Hey, look." Kasca held a short brass and steel sword aloft. "This must be Random's."

I ignored him and focused on the disturbance. It happened again, and again. Kasca walked over to me with the sword tucked in his belt.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Trouble." I began walking the Pattern in my mind just as approximately half of the sky rapidly faded from black to maroon to crimson. Beside me Kasca began gesturing. Small motes of rainbow light danced around his head.

The dark red blanket shrank and moved rapidly toward us above the sea of floating rocks. My cousin continued casting defensive spells until I finished my mental journey and called forth the lens.

It wasn't a pretty sight.

This time, I could see all sorts of powers: some Trump, a few Pattern tricks beyond basic, an unfamiliar weird fey power, and all kinds of sorcery. But I only got a glimpse before I felt something become aware of me. Then I lost my Pattern image.

I fell backwards in shock and slid down the wall of the tower.

Our visitor coalesced into his ugly self, replete with Nehru jacket and mirror shades. He materialized on a rock floating toward us with unnerving speed.

"He's better than me," I said. "Spooky powers won't work against him."

"Oh shit," Kasca said. I crouched and called forth my sword once more. Kasca apparently reached a similar conclusion, for he drew Random's blade and pointed it more or less at Amirahn. The magician's rock crunched into the base of the hill. I moved to Kasca's flank and stood on guard.

Then a strange thing happened.

Amirahn hovered up the hill toward us, but slowly. He didn't walk or run—he levitated. He kept his hands folded in front of him and all semblance of expression off his face. The tip of my sword moved with him, but he didn't approach us.

Instead, he flew slowly to a spot about halfway down the hill from where Kasca had found Random's sword. He stopped at a slight outcropping, and bent over. When he stood up, he had something in his hand.

"Wait!" Kasca shouted. He threw down Random's sword and went running down the hill. "That's mine."

Amirahn apparently didn't agree. He held the item in his hand for a moment before bowing to us and fading into crimson nothingness. Kasca swore like a sailor. I scanned the area around us but Amirahn was gone. I collected Random's sword and went down the hill to my cousin.

He was pacing around the site of Amirahn's discovery and kicking rocks.

"Is there something else you forgot to mention?" I asked him.

"Random's Trump deck. He lost it when he tried to rescue Brand the first time."

I let that thought stir my brain soup for a moment.

"Is that what we came here for?"

"Yeah," Kasca buried his head in his hands. "Supposedly it had some Trumps I don't have: Osric, Finndo, Mirelle."

"How exactly was this supposed to help us defeat Amirahn?"

"If we got the cards then he wouldn't get them. Now he has Trumps of all of the elders."

"Oh," I thought for a moment. "We probably led him here."

"Yeah, I suppose that makes sense."

"Hey, you're the expert," I said. "Why didn't you sense the Trumps when we first got here?"

"These damn rocks distort Trump energy. They block it except at extremely close range."

"So how did Amirahn find it so easily?"

Kasca's shoulders sagged. He breathed in and out through his nose.

"I guess," he said, "he's better than me."

It seemed like a long trip back to Kasca's ship. Even Bertha's throaty welcome as we entered the outer airlock did nothing to raise our spirits. As I helped Kasca maneuver to one of the Nine Worlds, we halfheartedly discussed what had happened and what we could have done differently. No hard and fast conclusions were reached other than the obvious one: we had failed.

Eventually we lapsed into a depressed silence. Kasca pulled out his Trump deck and laid out an elaborate scrye. I walked around the bridge without really seeing anything while my brain worked.

When we had first encountered Amirahn he didn't display any noteworthy powers. I would have noticed if he had contained any Pattern, even through the vid. Likewise Kasca with Trump. So it seemed a fair conclusion that he had somehow acquired those powers in a relatively short amount of time.

If he kept going at this rate he would be the Supreme Deity in another week or two. Then it would be really hard to kick his ass.

Kasca was still poring over his cards. I looked over his shoulder. It seemed like every card in the deck was in his spread. It was too much for me. So I changed my onyx ring into my Magic 8-Ball and tried to get some answers of my own.

"Is Amirahn more powerful than I am?"

<SIGNS POINT TO YES.>

"Is Amirahn more powerful with Pattern than I am?"

<DON'T COUNT ON IT.>

Well, that was encouraging, but not very definite. I asked another dozen questions before finally stumbling across one with an interesting answer.

"Is there any way we can defeat Amirahn?"

<MY REPLY IS NO.>

That was truly wonderful. I flung the damned artifact across the room. It bounced against a console and settled on the floor.

"Bad news?" Kasca asked. I walked back to him.

"Nothing but bad news."

"Me, too. According to my scryes," he pointed at the array of cards in front of him. "This Amirahn guy can crush us like bugs anytime he

wants to. There's no way to defeat him."

"That's what I got too."

"I don't know what to do."

"Well," I suggested, "Let's get back to Cenotaph Central and see if anyone else has discovered anything."

Our news were bad, but not the worst. I sat down in one of the recliners in the comfortable corner of our headquarters in Amber. Emilëa was perched on a hard wooden chair. Furoch stood near her. Kasca sat sideways near us. He was sketching. Marcus was sprawled across the couch.

"The Magician dude was in Arden," Marcus said. "He snuck in to the Dark Heart of the Wood. We didn't find a body, so he must have survived."

"Where's the Dark Heart of the Wood?" Kasca asked.

"I can't tell you."

"What is the Dark Heart of the Wood?" Emilëa inquired.

"The place where the Great Spirits live. They have lots of power."

"I have never even heard of this place before now," she said.

"Yeah, well..." Marcus shrugged. "You have now. I figure that this dude now has the Spirit powers too."

"I'll want to hear more about this place later," Emi instructed him, "But first we need to gather all our data concerning Amirahn in one place."

Emilëa relayed some facts from Rhys and Martin concerning Amirahn's appearances in various Golden Circle kingdoms and environs. I told about our encounter at Brand's Prison Tower.

"But we failed," I said. "Amirahn got the Trump deck."

"That is discouraging," Emi said, "But not strictly true. You didn't fail; you were seeking additional data. We have more empiric facts about Amirahn now than we did before."

"But all of it bad." Kasca shook his head dejectedly.

"Not necessarily," Emi corrected him. "But we'll get to the analysis later. Now I want to hear more about dragons."

Under repeated questioning Furoch claimed that his female dragon acquaintance was, like him, from a race whose origins predated Amber and perhaps even the Courts. There were very few of his kind around any more so he was understandably interested in meeting a potential mate. Eventually he admitted that she had actually been told of his existence and location by Amirahn. We wanted to question her directly but he steadfastly refused to tell us anything more about her, draconic history, or anything useful other than to call our attention to one of the tapestries on the walls.

It depicted a dragon among pantherlike demons and some skeletal birds. Furoch claimed it was an illustration of one of the fables of his race. Again, he refused to elaborate.

We might have argued with him for another hour except that at that moment the door slammed open. Fiona stood there breathing heavily, her hair whipping about her in the wind.

"Tell me everything you know," she said, "About this monster called Amirahn."

We led her in, shut the door, and sat her in a cozy chair. Kasca poured her a cup of hot tea. As best we could, we told her all we knew about the Magician. Then it was Fiona's turn. Her story was particularly disheartening. She had easily found Amirahn, or he had found her—she wasn't sure.

"As soon as I started looking for him, I found him. It is extremely improbable that he would be in the first place I looked, but he was.

"And he was ready. I almost believe he was waiting for me."

We hung on her every word. She had traveled to Ygg by some instantaneous means that she didn't divulge. Then she began searching through Shadow using the Pattern Lens.

Suddenly, Amirahn was there. He used the same fade through crimson into a body effect he had pulled in the Land of the Floating Rocks. But he didn't attack. He stood quietly before Fiona, hands clasped in front of him. She reached out, mind to mind, and entered his consciousness.

"It was nearly overwhelming, a flurry of images all weaving in and around each other. Whatever he is, he's not human—nor is he like anything else I've ever experienced before. His thoughts were more chaotic, more diverse, more non-linear than I would have thought possible.

"I saw many scenes, including his encounters with all of you: the bar, the nightclub, Rebma, the fringes of Arden, a few places in the Golden Circle, the Heart of the Woods, the Floating Rocks, the Abyss, the Chamber of the Logrus, and then there at Ygg. There were hundreds of other images as well, with hundreds of other people, if not thousands.

"I tried to control the stream, to enforce some order on it. I could just barely discern a beginning, so I grabbed at it."

I held my breath, then let it out. No one moved or made a sound.

"He was alone," Fi continued, "In the dark, unmoving, almost unthinking—just waiting. It seemed like he had been in that state for hundreds of years. Then he felt a ripple, like the wake of a wave. It pushed against him and he stirred. He moved slowly, trying to find the source of the energy. I could feel his yearning. It was rather childlike in its simplicity. He emerged from a dark chamber in a great castle made of translucent white stones. I recognized the place from a memory of my own, older than any of you.

"He stood on the balcony of the castle at Avalon, as it was before it was destroyed. The land stretched out before him in brilliant green and gold. A lone rider galloped away on a roan horse toward the horizon." Fiona turned and looked at Kasca. "It was you."

"Um," Kasca held up one finger. "Did I forget to mention that I found Avalon?"

I thought Marcus was going to rip his head off right then and there. I moved between the two of them and pacified Marcus as best I could. But everyone's eyes were on Kasca.

"It would behoove you to explain yourself," Emilëa said.

"There was nothing there," Bleys's son implored. "The whole place was empty."

"Apparently not," I said.

Everyone spoke at once, all trying to steer the Q&A session in a particular direction. After a few unrewarding minutes of interrogating Kasca, talk returned to our elusive Magician. What was Amirahn doing? How could he zip across the multiverse so quickly? It seemed like he was in multiple places at the same time. What was his purpose? What did he want?

After this last question was voiced, Fiona spoke up again.

"Beneath all of the images in his mind I saw an underlying impetus. I had thought it was childlike, but I was wrong. It was furious and demanding. Over and over again his mind pushed against me with fierce determination. After several moments, I felt him test my boundaries. After nearly a minute I lost a measure of control over him.

"After three minutes, he expelled me from his mind and began probing at my mental defenses. I repelled him easily at first, but he quickly adapted and got stronger. He slipped past my first barriers. I attacked him all out. He staggered but came on, even faster and harder.

"I left immediately. After I reported in to Random, I came to talk with all of you. Now if you'll excuse me, I think I'm going to go lie down for a while."

As my aunt walked out the door, we all sat in stunned silence. Perhaps thirty seconds passed before Kasca broke the mood.

"Now I don't feel so bad that the Magician is better than me," he said, then resumed his sketching.

Yeah, if this guy could out-brain Fiona, we were all in serious trouble. We sat in silence for a few moments.

"Why did he call himself Amirahn?" I asked.

"You know," Kasca observed, "if this were an ordered universe, we should be able to glean some clue from his name."

"We only have the Magician's flyer with his name on it," Furoch pointed out. "There's no reason why that has to be his real name."

"Good point," Fiona's daughter said. "Also, we don't know if we have the pronunciation correct. Many people mispronounce our names, Em-Ih-Lay-Uh, and Ad-Ray-Ahn-O, because they are unfamiliar with punctuation marks. But that debate is academic." Emi rubbed her hands together briskly. "If we're going to solve this problem, we need to identify the various components and break them down into categories."

After she had explained what she meant, we produced a long list of Amirahn's activities that can be summed up in one paragraph:

In one way or another, Amirahn caused us to use Powers in his presence. He later displayed partial use of those skills and an increase in

ability and strength to kick our assorted asses from here to the Fire Gate. The guy was a serious power sponge and he had every power we knew about (and at least one we didn't). All indicators pointed to our being unable to defeat him no matter what we did.

Everything about this guy was damned depressing.

After a few moments of glum silence, Kasca finally put down his pencil.

"Hey, take a look at this," he said. We all crowded over to look at his drawings.

"What are you doing?" I said. "The last Trump sketch you drew attracted those weird red tendrils."

"It's not a Trump sketch. It's just a picture of him."

It was a pretty good job. He had captured Amirahn from several angles.

"Now look at this."

This picture had the Magician dressed in a typical doublet and lacking his avant-garde sunglasses.

"Yeah, we should post that around the city with a note that says 'If you see this dude, run.'" Marcus suggested.

"Does he look at all familiar?" Kasca asked.

Hmmm. He was broad like Gérard, and his cheekbones resembled Eric's portrait.

"He's got Bleys's chin," Emilëa said. We all agreed.

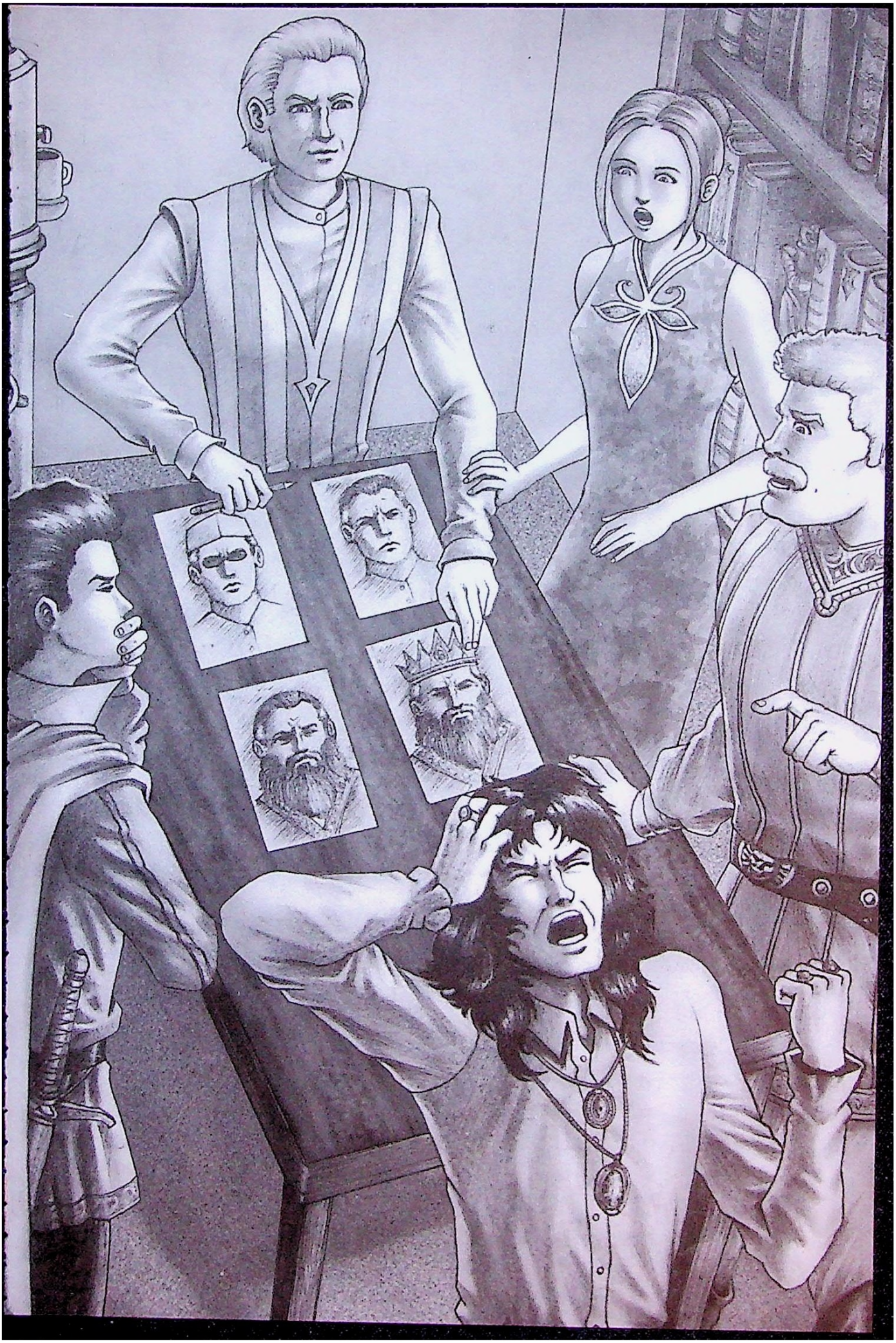
"So what if he grew a beard to hide it?" Kasca revealed his final drawing. "And a mustache, and long hair."

We all gasped. My butt muscles clenched on the comfy chair.

Amirahn looked exactly like Oberon.

Chapter 3

Talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk... "Oberon is dead." "Maybe he's not." "Amirahn isn't Oberon. Just because he looks like him..." "He doesn't act like him." "How would you know?" "Fiona would know; she talked with him..." More talk, talk, talk. Everything that could have possibly been said about Amirahn and Oberon was said by someone. After nearly



forty-five minutes of this, I gave up and went outside.

A brisk wind blew down the slopes of Kolvir. It whipped my hair into my face no matter which direction I turned. The sun was setting across the sea behind the mountain. It was hard not to think of that as a metaphor for what was happening.

After a few moments of frustrated wrangling, I wrestled my mind into line with some pseudo-zen koans Caine had taught me. I became calm, peaceful, conscious of all that was around me.

It didn't help; we were still screwed.

Emilëa exited Corwin's cenotaph and walked over to me. We stood for a moment and watched the sky fade to red and purple.

"It's beautiful," she said. I agreed.

"I just hope Amirahn doesn't destroy it all," I said.

"What makes you think he will?"

I started to answer, then paused. I really had no idea what Amirahn wanted.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I just assumed that he was our enemy."

"Exactly," she pointed one finger at me. "Yet consider his actions closely. He has never attacked any of us except in retaliation."

Hmmm, I thought. That seemed true.

"And," Emi continued, "the fact that he resembles Oberon, while not incidental, should in no way be construed as evidence of a conclusion. It's just another clue, albeit an allegedly important one."

Despite the big words, that almost made sense.

"So where are you going?" I asked her.

"To research more about Oberon."

"Really? Is there a great library somewhere that holds all the secrets of the universe? If so, I would love to know where it is."

She smiled and patted me on the shoulder.

"Just keep them from attacking the Magician again. We know that won't work."

She wrapped her cloak around her and set off toward the castle.

"Good luck," I shouted after her. I watched her slight form dwindle until she passed behind a rocky outcropping and disappeared from my sight. With a sigh, I turned and re-entered our headquarters.

Thankfully, the squabbling was over. Kasca was sipping coffee and admiring the whiteboard. It was covered in scribbles and lines, some of it legible, some of it Kasca's handwriting. Marcus sat across a large chair near Kasca commenting on the notes.

"This dude's impossible," Marcus said. "He's everywhere at once."

"Dare I say," Kasca smiled at his own cleverness, "He's ubiquitous in Shadow?"

Marcus groaned and they continued arguing, making more notes on the whiteboard. I strolled over to where Furoch was sifting through the couple dozen books that comprised our library.

"Anything interesting?" I asked.

"Not particularly, unless you're fascinated with simians." He showed me the titles: *Orangutan Culture and Society, Koko's Kitten, Monkeys are Your Friends.*

"Ah," I nodded. "One of Kasca's interests."

"He has quite a collection here. I had hoped to find a scholarly treatise or two about your Pattern."

"Emilëa has those, but she doesn't share."

"A pity." He replaced the books on the shelf. "Knowledge should be available for all who want it, not for the privileged few to hoard."

That was an interesting comment. Perhaps my cousin's draconic acquaintance's remark was more than a simple opinion about knowledge in general. Of course, every visitor to Amber wanted to see the Pattern, but very few cared to learn more about it—excepting spies, saboteurs, and obsessed scholars.

I wondered which category would suit Furoch best. I resolved then to get to know him better. He seemed to be rather observant, although not forthcoming with his observations. As he also came from a different background, I thought that his opinions and perceptions might shed some light on the current situation. To that end, I invited him to accompany me on my fact-finding mission.

"Where are we going, exactly?" he asked.

"Various places," I replied. "Shadows, the Courts of Chaos, the Pattern Room, to visit the King, maybe visit Rak, wherever..."

"What is the purpose of this journey?"

"We're going to find the Magician." I glanced over to see if they had noticed, but my cousins were still neck-deep in theories. "Shhhh, it's a secret."

"Interesting," he said, and tapped his lips with a long, curiously jointed finger. "I shall accompany you if you agree to answer my questions."

"I shall endeavor to do so to the best of my ability, *if*" I emphasized the point, "you shall answer mine in return."

"Fair enough." We shook hands and walked toward the door.

"Keep in touch!" Kasca shouted as we departed.

Standing on a high protrusion of white stone, surrounded by pale green flames, I spread my arms wide and turned my face toward Furoch.

"Behold the Courts of Chaos," I said. He swiveled his head from side to side, taking in the dark sky and black sea far below us. I put away my Trump of the Fire Gate.

"Is that the Abyss?" He pointed down toward the murky waters churning against the rocks.

"No," I said. "The Abyss is much more colorful and utterly dark." I shrugged. "And extremely indescribable."

Furoch said nothing as I located my landmarks and began walking toward the fifth flickering tower in the distance. He caught up with me easily and paced me for the better part of a mile across that bleak stone plain. We descended rough-hewn steps into a dark cave and emerged behind an orange waterfall surrounded by purple ferns. Skirting a dark tawny pool, we made our way around a hedgerow that transported us to a desert in the midst of a vicious sandstorm. I quickly backtracked.

"Sorry," I said. "Wrong way."

Some six Ways and forty minutes later we stood at the edge of the Plaza at the End of the World. To our right, Thelbane pierced the red sky, boldly thrusting its self-importance. Further to our left, the lumpy black stones of the Cathedral of the Serpent pretended not to notice.

Thankfully, Furoch wasn't the talkative type. I had answered a few

of his questions, but for the most part he was content to observe. I had *Found* us a couple of dark gray novices' robes and serpent brooches. We pulled the cowls over our heads and slunk across the plaza toward the Keeper's Tower.

I steered us around the various humans, demons, and whatnot to a side door. We waited while a woman selling sheets of vellum was turned away by a servant. After she had departed, I strode forward and caught the door before it closed.

"I beg your pardon, brother—" the servant began.

"No brother," I said, and pulled back my cowl, "but a Lord of Chaos. Here to see the Keeper on urgent business."

"You're that Amberite fellow," he said and scowled. "I doubt the Master will interrupt his work for such as you."

"Give him this." I handed the man my planished silver ring.

With a grunt he allowed us to enter the small foyer. He told us to wait and departed. The room was small, with no chairs. Furoch and I stood just inside the doorway. There was barely enough room for me to pace, but I did it anyway.

"Do you expect the Keeper to see us?" Furoch's tone was surprisingly unconcerned.

"Honestly, I don't know." I paused in my pacing. "I hope so."

After exactly sixty-seven circuits of the small room, the servant reappeared. Without a word, he bowed and gestured for us to follow. I let Furoch go first. Wiping my sweaty palms on my robe, I stared at the dragon's retreating back and forced myself to keep up with him.

We made our way through the black stone tunnels, occasionally taking side passages or passing through heavy iron doors which the servant laboriously opened with a large iron key. I had been this way only once before, but I remembered every step of it. My heart began to flutter in my chest.

Finally, we stood at a large round door of black stone, nearly twelve feet in diameter. Carved into its surface were thousands of sigils, glyphs and runes. These had been filled with gold, silver, copper, and a hundred other lesser metals. I didn't need to have the lens up to know that this was Sorcery with a capital "S." On either side of the entrance stood a

demonformed Royal Guard; staring at my shoes, I didn't see what they looked like very clearly.

"Gentlemen," the servant pronounced, "the Master will see you now." He passed his hands over various parts of the door and I could see some of the symbols were glowing. I closed my eyes and turned my back, clenching my fists tightly in anticipation.

With a thunderous hissing, the door cycled open. I felt a million volts of angry energy pass through me. I opened my eyes. Furoch walked forward and passed from my sight. It was all I could do to keep from running away.

Gritting my teeth, I raised my head and looked inside.

It writhed and thrashed, over-filling the small chamber with its pale green and yellow radiance: the Logrus, manifest. Although the room itself was only a couple dozen paces wide, the exploding Mobius strip had a depth far surpassing the capabilities of normal physics. It was pure energy, power, force, and it hated me more than was humanly possible.

My muscles and skin felt like they were trying to crawl off my bones—away from this agonizing furnace of pain. My head dove toward my chest as my eyes registered the after-images of that worse-than-blinding light. It took all of my will to keep from running away. I heard Suhuy's demon-voice from within the Logrus chamber.

"Child of the Serpent," he hissed, "issss it finally time?" The words sounded familiar to me, in a bad-premonition sort of way.

"What time is that?" Furoch asked.

"What other? Time to remake the world, of courssssse." He laughed, a deep, sibilant whisper.

I forced myself to move, dragging one foot forward after the other.

"I think you mistake me," Furoch said. "I do not know you."

I took another step. The doorway loomed before me.

"Perhaps not, my ophidian sssir."

I took a step. And another. I felt the heat of the Logrus burning at

me for a moment before raising my hand to shade my face. Sweat formed on my brow and beaded down my skin. The Logrus gnawed at the base of my brain stem. I had only been in the presence of this monstrous thing once before, but something seemed odd. The pain didn't feel the same as it had before. It felt different. Then again, that was the nature of Chaos.

"I beg your pardon," Furoch continued after several moments. "Adréano?"

I pushed my head up to look at him. Furoch stood a few feet in front of me with a puzzled look on his face. Past him was a ten-foot-tall, humanoid-shaped mass of dark snakes dressed in a yellow caftan: Suhuy, the Keeper of the Logrus.

"Ahhhhh, young Lord D'al Sssszoli." He acknowledged me. Almost instantly the glare from the Logrus dimmed substantially and the pain receded to merely extremely annoying levels. "I had not expected to see you in thisss place again."

I tried to recover my cool, failed, and strode forward anyway.

"Keeper, this is Furoch, an associate of Lord Rak of Amber. Furoch, this is Master Suhuy, Keeper of the Logrus and Duke of the Tybaldran Steppes." That short speech dried out my throat completely.

Suhuy glided forward and paused near Furoch. The Keeper's eyes, glowing points of red light suspended in the correct positions in his "face," burned a bright orange, then yellow. The dragon turned his head slightly, obviously unnerved but pretending otherwise.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, noble sir," Furoch said.

"Sssssssssss," Suhuy's snakes' tongues licked out, tasting the air. Furoch endured this scrutiny with typical stoicism. After a few seconds, Suhuy's shape shimmered and changed to his human form. He brushed his shaggy white hair back from his eyes and offered his hand to Furoch, who shook it. Then Suhuy's eyes crinkled and his lips curled upward slightly. People who didn't know him might consider it a smile. He turned aside, shuffled a few small steps, and gestured for us to follow.

The strain was enormous, but I didn't hesitate. I knew that the Pattern in me was stronger than the Logrus, even here at its heart.

We were led around the Logrus for a half minute before Suhuy ushered us behind a low stone wall and through a curtained doorway. As I

passed into the next room, I immediately felt much, much better.

"Ssso," the Keeper said, "Has the Cycle turned?"

I looked up, wondering what he meant, but the Keeper was looking at Furoch. As Suhuy sat down crookedly in a low chair, Furoch looked questioningly at me. I shrugged.

"What cycle is that?" Furoch asked.

"Ah," Suhuy formed a steeple with his fingers and tapped them against his lips. "The females were ever in control."

Furoch grimaced at that comment, the most pronounced expression I had seen him make yet. It made me think again of Furoch's dragon lady friend. I decided I needed to know more about her.

"Keeper," I licked my dry lips and dropped into a low chair, "I have brought this... man... here with me so that we might learn more about the thing that calls itself Amirahn."

Suhuy sat silently for a moment. I looked around for something to drink but found nothing. Furoch stood patiently by, his eyes darting around the nearly-empty room. Suhuy and I sat on two of the five chairs that perched around a similarly low table. There was a pale yellow rug covering the floor, and the curtained doorway through which we had entered. There appeared to be no other exits, but that seemed unlikely.

"Tea?" A small pot and several cups appeared in front of Suhuy. I hadn't felt any use of the Logrus, which struck me as odd. Then again, what I didn't know about the Logrus could fill several volumes in the Keeper's library—and did. I had seen them.

The smell of lemon and mint assaulted my nostrils. I graciously accepted the cup. Furoch declined, so Suhuy and I sat and sipped our tea together. It was delicious.

Suhuy was silent, so I took the opportunity to give him an abbreviated version of what I knew about Amirahn, leaving out anything Random would probably consider Top Secret. Shortly after I had relayed Fiona's brief encounter, Suhuy set his cup down and interrupted me.

"Ah, yes. I know the entity of whom you speak."

"You know him?" I said.

"He traversed the Logrus." Fiona had told us that, but I wasn't prepared for what came next. "I encouraged him, gave him a few suggestions

concerning the trickier parts."

"What? You helped him?" I half rose out of my seat, spilling my tea onto the rug. Suhuy gestured and the stain vanished.

"Of course," he said. "He might not have succeeded otherwise."

"But, why? Why would you help him?"

"Mmmm," he sipped at his tea. "No, that's not the right question."

I pleaded with him for several minutes. Furoch said nothing, but I sensed his frustration as well. Suhuy merely kept insisting that I was asking the wrong questions.

He wouldn't tell me what the right questions were, either.

Eventually, my frustration grew to be too much. I didn't think that attacking the Keeper of the Logrus was my best idea, but it was looking better and better with each aggravating second. Then I remembered something.

"Has the Logrus changed at all? It feels different to me."

He looked at me for a long time before answering.

"The Logrus is ever-changing, Lord D'al Szoli."

Suhuy continued to stare at me, his eyes shifting colors. It made me nervous.

"I think we had better leave." I stood up. "We'll take the back way, if you don't mind."

"By all means." The Keeper waved his hand and an archway appeared on the far wall. Furoch and I walked toward it.

"Soon," Suhuy said quietly to himself. "Soon they shall know how we felt." I regarded him closely and he spoke in a louder voice. "Tell Dworkin, 'Rook takes Knight. Check.'"

I searched for something witty to say. Finding nothing, I thanked the Keeper for speaking with us. Suhuy's eyes crinkled up again and he set his teacup down.

We passed through the archway and into an alley not far from the Keeper's Tower.

"How did you know about the 'back way'?" Furoch asked.

"I didn't," I told him. "I guessed. I really didn't want to go back through the Chamber of the Logrus."

He nodded.

"Where to now?" he asked.

I had promised to show him the Abyss. We pulled up our priestly cowls and skirted the Plaza. It made me nervous to get too close to the Cathedral while impersonating clergy, so we clambered down a quiet street between some boring government buildings.

At the end of the road, the road quite literally ended. Beyond it lay a vast darkness unlike anything else in the multiverse. I stopped several paces from the absolute edge and took a few deep breaths. Furoch slunk right up to the rim and peered over, apparently unconcerned. I felt a sudden urge to jump forward and push him over, but quickly suppressed it.

"It's fascinating," he said quietly.

I walked up next to him and looked down. Fighting the sensation of overwhelming vertigo, I tried to simply observe this End of All Things without analyzing its purpose. Full of more shades of black than ever imagined, the Abyss somehow swam in colors. Every shade of the rainbow and hundreds more sparkled and danced, just beyond peripheral vision.

It was interesting, but also too alluring, like the Siren's song. I wanted to dive in headfirst. Instead, I took several steps backwards and waited for Furoch to join me.

We Trumped back to the Fire Gate, then set out on foot. It took me nearly twenty minutes to navigate the Ways until we were far enough from the Courts for me to *Find* some horses and begin to shift Shadow. Furoch didn't help me. Apparently, dragons had no intrinsic means of navigating between Shadows.

We talked for a while about the use of Pattern. Furoch knew it could be used to travel between Shadows, but he was unaware of its other uses, such as probability manipulation. Either Rak had never demonstrated this skill or he had kept it a secret from his draconic acquaintance.

I asked about their relationship. Furoch claimed that he and Rak were friends, largely due to their being the only two immortals living in the Nine Worlds. After learning about each other's existence, they had studied

one another for many years before meeting. Neither of them had been prone to friends, Furoch said, because everyone else died eventually. So he and Rak had become acquaintances, then occasional partners, and eventually, full-time allies in Rak's struggles against the criminal elements of their worlds.

Of course, they could never quite get rid of the criminals. Years of planning fell short, and the enemy consistently survived to resurface stronger than ever.

"Did you ever learn who the enemy was?" I prompted.

Furoch smirked and looked sideways at me.

"Not until rather recently," he said.

"Oh?" I stifled a chuckle.

"Yes," he exhaled abruptly. "Kasca told me that he had enjoyed our 'contest' for many years, but that he would have to concede as he could no longer spend as much time in the area."

I laughed. After a moment, Furoch smiled and whuffed a slight laugh as well.

"Yeah," he said. "Rak was pretty upset. Kasca said he only did it to fight off the boredom. Plus, he liked 'needling' Rak."

That definitely sounded like the Kasca I knew. We talked about him a little, his quirks and his subjective way of viewing the world. Kasca had once sworn to me that he had never told a lie in his life. When I caught him in a lie later, he admitted that his sworn oath was a lie too. He didn't let any sense of morality interfere with his fun.

We talked about the first meeting with Amirahn, and about Kasca and Rak's musical assault later in the evening. That gave me the opportunity to bring up the female dragon.

"What is her name?" I asked.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because I'm going to get tired of saying 'the female dragon we met that one night at Hanno's Place' over and over again."

He hesitated a moment. I had been forthright with him, answering all of his questions. Of course, I could abandon him in some backwater Shadow where Trump didn't work. Maybe he saw that fact in my smiling face.

"You may call her Anya," he said.

"Is that her name?"

"A shortened version of it. Draconic names are rather long."

"I believe that it might have helped us to learn more about Amirahn if we had been able to question her."

"Perhaps," Furoch said. He almost looked guilty.

"Well then, is there a way we can contact her?"

He did look sheepish then.

"No," he admitted. "She has a means of contacting me, but I have no way of contacting her."

"That's rather inconvenient."

"Yes."

It turned out that Furoch had spoken with Anya once more since the night they had met. He thought that she was also unable to pass freely among Shadow worlds, but she had implied she would be able to find him when the time was right.

That didn't help at all.

"What did Suhuy mean when he said that the 'females were in control'?"

"I don't know," Furoch said. "I had never met a female of my species until a few days ago."

In fact, he had never met another true dragon. Ever. He didn't remember his youth, had never known his parents, and knew almost nothing about draconic society.

"What about the tapestries?" I asked. "You said those related to some story of your people."

"Yes, I have a book of the history of dragons."

"May I see it?"

"No," he said. I changed the subject.

The hours passed. We rode our horses through Shadow, moving ever closer to Amber. After most of the day, we were out of the immediate environs of the Courts. Another six hours of riding got us past the Black Zone kingdoms. I moved us away for another hour, then reined up.

It was time to begin the hunt for Amirahn.

Furoch and I had discussed how we were going to attempt this several times. Given the Magician's undeniable attraction to Power with a capital

"P," we had spent most of our time deciding what would work best to attract him.

Furoch either didn't have any powers, or he was keeping them a secret. That left me to do the dirty work. I thought that erasing a worthless, unpopulated Shadow with overwhelming electrical and sorcerous qualities should send a sufficient ripple of Shadow storms out that Amirahn couldn't help but notice. So we rode around until I found the right place, prepared for our retreat, and got to work.

Erasing a Shadow is easier said than done. I had to catalog, analyze, and manually obliterate the individual Forms of each of the major substrata. I had done it a couple times before, so I knew what to expect. Still, it took me the better part of an hour and gave me a major headache.

We retreated to our safe haven, ate a huge meal, and waited. As far as the eye could see, only pale brown dust surrounded us. The Magician couldn't sneak up on us here.

Almost instantly, I felt the beginnings of a Trump call, but not just any Trump call. I got that special kind of Trump call that I really hated getting. As soon as I answered it, I knew. The contact ended abruptly.

"Aw, crap." I said. Furoch looked quizzically at me and took up a fighting stance. I slumped to the ground and sulked.

Thirty feet from us, a rainbow-colored, diamond-shaped gate eight feet wide opened up. Out stepped Caine in his usual dark green and brown traveling clothes, looking as glum as ever.

Right behind him came Bleys, dressed inappropriately in red and yellow silks. He smiled jovially and waved at me.

Caine stomped quietly up and stood glowering over me, his hands crossed in front of his chest.

"Hey, Dad." I put on a fake smile. "How are ya?"

"Disappointed."

"I was trying—" I began.

"Random told me to keep you from doing anything stupid."

"Um, too late?" I suggested.

"It's not funny," he said. However, sauntering up beside him, Bleys was laughing. The musky scent of his cologne tickled my nostrils.

"Hi Uncle," I sat up and shook his hand. "I would like to introduce

you both to Furoch. Furoch—Caine and Bleys, Princes of Amber."

"We've met," Caine said, frowning at the dragon. Furoch's brows furrowed for a moment, then a look of recognition passed over his face. He bristled expectantly, but Caine just stared at him without blinking.

Bleys stepped over and shook Furoch's hand heartily.

"Pleased to meet you." He looked down at their conjoined hands. "Quite a grip you've got there. Hate to wrestle you."

Furoch merely smiled, his eyes narrowing at Caine. I stood up and positioned myself between them, then quickly moved out of the way. What had I been thinking? If they had wanted to come to blows, I wouldn't even have been able to slow them down.

"Alright, alright," I made pacifying gestures at both of them. "There's no need to get into that right now. We've got a Magician to find."

"No you don't," Caine said.

"Actually—" Bleys started to reply but shut up quickly when Caine glowered at him.

"Yeah, why not?" I asked.

"I just told you," he said, poking a stout finger in my chest.

I argued with him. It wasn't stupid to summon Amirahn, my argument went, because we didn't believe he would attack us. All the evidence pointed out that he would only defend himself; if we didn't attack him, maybe we could simply talk with him.

Caine listened, making no effort to counter my line of reasoning. Instead, he simply disagreed as if that were the end of the story.

"This is a threat to all of Amber, if not all of the multiverse," I pleaded. "We've got to take the chance."

"He's expendable," Caine glanced at Furoch. "You're not."

"But he doesn't have any way to get Amirahn's attention."

"That doesn't matter. Besides," Caine smiled, "apparently, neither do you."

It had been nearly ten minutes. Amirahn hadn't appeared.

"Ahem," Bleys cleared his throat. We all looked at him. He smiled disarmingly. "Perhaps I could be of some help."

Caine crooked his mouth in disgust.

"Fine," he said. "I'll tell the King it was your idea." He walked

away and knelt down in the dust, ignoring us altogether.

Bleys motioned for Furoch and me to come closer. When we did, he put his hands on our shoulders in an overly-friendly manner.

"Think I know what might work," he said.

"Be my guest," I replied.

He stepped back. With a flourish, he unsheathed his sword. I gasped. Golden sunlight danced across the blade. It was all the more impressive because this Shadow had no sun.

"Where did you get that sword?" I asked.

Bleys merely smiled.

"Pretty, ain't it?"

"I thought it was lost in the Abyss."

"Was," he agreed.

He dropped the point and began drawing arcane symbols in the dust. He drew a circle around himself, then another one a little smaller. He filled in the space between the lines with runes and symbols.

I could sense the energy flooding in, like the summer air just before the storm breaks. I hurried to mentally walk the Pattern and summon the Lens.

I was too slow, but maybe that was a good thing.

Bleys finished his inscriptions and raised Werewindle. He executed a series of complex gestures with it, ending in a sharp salute. Dazzling yellow beams of light erupted out of the scratchings in the dust, darted toward his sword, and shot out in all directions. For a split second, the whole world was blinding energy.

I blinked my eyes. I had lost my place in my Patternwalk. I tried to begin again, but I was disoriented. I stumbled and caught myself. Furoch helped ease me to the ground.

Then Amirahn arrived.

Skip ahead a couple minutes, past the Red Blanket Descending trick. Fast forward over Caine's defensive posturing and Bleys's desire to

examine Amirahn like a science project. Obviously interested, Mr. Magnificent studied Bleys's glowing sword, but from a safe distance. Okay, we had established that nobody was going to attack anyone right away. Good. That got us to where we were now: standing around talking.

At a generous gesture from Bleys, I took charge of the Q&A session.

"Why have you chased us around?" I said.

"I must know," he said.

"Must know what?"

"I must know."

After a few more tries and several identical responses, I tried a different approach.

"Why did you put on the magic show?" I asked.

"To draw you to me."

"Why did you want me around?"

"To recognize you." He said this like it was an appropriate response.

"What?" I exclaimed. Bleys failed to suppress a laugh.

"To recognize you."

"Yeah, yeah. I heard that part." I twirled one of my rings around my finger, then stopped when I realized it was the sword ring.

"May I?" Furoch asked.

"Go ahead."

The dragon took a step closer to Amirahn. He was now standing in front of a little semi-circle of Amberites. Caine's hands never strayed far from his daggers, but Bleys had a big grin on his face as he stroked his beard.

"What is your earliest memory?"

"That is irrelevant."

"I don't agree." Furoch tried again. "What is your earliest memory?"

"I became aware of the passage of the one of him," Amirahn said, indicating Bleys. That was Kasca in Avalon, I thought.

"Where did this occur?" Furoch inquired.

"I do not understand."

Furoch repeated the question, then again in several different variations. Amirahn gave the same response each time.

"Who put you there?"

"I do not understand."

Furoch tried to discover how Amirahn had come to be in that place, but, according to the Magician, he had always been there. Either that or he didn't know.

"Where are we now?" Bleys prompted.

"We are aware." Maybe he was, but I was feeling pretty oblivious myself.

"Where were you when the Amberite passed near you?"

"I became aware."

"Where was the magic show on Nelan's Rock?"

"I do not understand."

Bleys asked a few more questions about places, but Amirahn couldn't answer any of them.

"It doesn't seem to conceive of space as we do," my redheaded uncle said. "It doesn't differentiate between physical locations, only temporal ones."

"Yeah," I snapped my fingers as things clicked into place. "He seemed to be everywhere at once. I guess that almost explains it... but not really."

Amirahn waited patiently for me to continue.

"What happened after you became aware?" I asked him.

"I followed the Amberite of him," he said, nodding at Bleys. Kasca was Bleys's son, so that fact lined up correctly. At about that time, the devil himself appeared on Bleys's outstretched hand. He spoke with his father for a few moments, then joined the party.

I continued to prompt Amirahn to tell us of his travels. He had journeyed around all over the universe, just like Fiona said. With careful questioning, we were able to piece together a fairly comprehensive sequence of situations, events, the Powers that had interested him, and the people he had followed or tracked to every location.

I have summarized this long, tedious conversation and translated it from Amirahn's limited vocabulary. You're welcome.

1. From Avalon he followed Kasca, learning how to trail someone through

Shadow.
2. He went to the Nine Worlds, following Kasca around and studying his use of Trump. He couldn't replicate this, but he found he was able to use his own, energy-related something-or-other to return to places he had visited or to the current vicinity of people that he had "recognized," which seemed limited to Amberites and people with powers.
3. Kasca led him to Rak, where he learned sorcery. He also observed Furoch and recognized that he was unlike the rest of us.
4. Amirahn detected an unusual presence in Avalon, so he returned there. He met Anya, the female dragon, and spoke with her at some length. She seemed to be the first person who actually knew that he was unusual, and who consciously taught him something. From her he learned sleight of hand magic, a few things about the multiverse, and he made some sort of deal with her. Amirahn didn't say it clearly, but we all understood that she also taught him the fine art of deception.
5. He found me through a Trump call from Kasca, and eventually met up with me in the alley in Mezzone. Interpreting his answers left me with the distinct impression that he wasn't really attacking me, just trying to "recognize" sword-fighting. I suppose I should have felt guilty for killing him, but seeing as he was still alive, I decided not to.
6. With additional study, he had developed a way to overhear and follow Kasca's Trump calls. Bleys's son called Llewella, and Amirahn listened in. When he re-formed his body, he went to Rebma.

"I don't think Llewella told anyone about its visit," Bleys said. "Random should have been notified, at least."

"Yes," Caine said. We waited, but that was all. I continued drawing the information out of our new friend.

7. Rak and Kasca tried to summon Amirahn with ritual magic and Trump powers—a fact that Kasca hadn't mentioned before. I scowled at him and he tried to look innocent. Of course, since this combination of powers was unknown to Amirahn, it worked. He had never been waiting for them on Karlur IV; he had followed them there.
8. Kasca spoke with Marcus and Amirahn scouted around Arden and the

Heart of the Woods. He "recognized" the Great Spirit powers. Martin was in Arden, so Amirahn followed him into the Golden Circle where he also encountered Rhys.

9. My experiment with Kasca combining sorcery, Trump, and the ability of Pattern to affect Shadow rules drew his attention next to the Floating Rocks. Once there, he detected the Trump deck and took it before we could stop him.

10. With the deck in his possession, the Magician was able to spy on all the conversations of the people depicted. He listened for a long time, and was contacted again by Anya. She helped him fill in the gaps in his knowledge. He followed a convoluted trail that led him to the Courts via Merlin. But it wasn't that simple.

"Corwin!" Kasca exclaimed when Amirahn held up the card to indicate whom he had used to trace Merlin. "He's alive."

"Yeah," I said. "And apparently you missed him when you visited Avalon as well. What exactly did you do there?"

"Balls of the Horse! The place was dead, I tell you. There were absolutely no signs of life."

"Just because you couldn't detect them doesn't mean they weren't there."

"Ummm." He rubbed his chin. "I guess maybe I could have brought someone else along to help me search the place. But that would have given away my secret. I worked hard to find that place."

Upon further questioning, Amirahn admitted that Corwin had been with Anya in this same Avalon. I asked Kasca how easy it was to get there and he shook his head.

"It took me almost a month, subjectively." He sighed. "I drew a Trump of the place but it doesn't work."

I didn't feel like spending a month Shadowshifting to test a theory. Still, it might be worth looking into when I next had the time to spare. Or maybe Fiona would finally show me that shortcut she used. Finding Corwin might be enough motivation, although I doubted it. I filed the thought away for future use.

Caine had walked away from us until he was well out of hearing

range. From his gestures, I could tell he was talking to someone via Trump—probably several people based on the amount of time it took him. We continued our friendly interrogation.

11. In the Courts he had "recognized" the Abyss and spoken with Suhuy. I already knew how that had turned out, so I told Bleys and Kasca about Suhuy's assisting Amirahn with passing through the Logrus.

12. Fiona did something flashy at Ygg and Amirahn went there. I told Bleys her version of the story. It seemed to match Amirahn's on all the salient points.

We digested this, clarified a few things, and posed some follow-up questions. While Furoch was asking Amirahn all he knew about Anya, Caine returned. He listened as well, and asked only one question.

"After you have recognized everything, what do you intend to do?"

"It is irrelevant," Amirahn replied.

"No, it's not." Caine didn't move, but I saw his hands loosen up. Furoch took a quick step away from him.

"Upon full recognition, I will no longer exist."

Caine nodded once and relaxed slightly. We talked about what this all meant, what people hadn't told us, and what to do next. I was sure I was missing something, but it was a while before I remembered.

"The fire," I said. "Why did you start the fire?"

"I recognized the music," he said, as if that explained everything. I recounted what had happened and Bleys nodded knowingly.

"Music is energy," he said. "This thing doesn't distinguish between Powers, as we call them, and other forms of energy. It simply seeks out reactions where energy is converted from one form to another. Then it 'recognizes' or absorbs the knowledge and means of how to achieve the same effects."

"But if he has to absorb all of the known forms of energy in the whole freaking multiverse," I said, "won't that take forever?"

"No," Bleys said. "The total amount of energy is large, but it's not infinite. It is limited in forms by simple mathematical equations, for example—"

"No no no." I stopped him before he recited strings of equations

and fried my brain. "I'll take your word for it. But why does he appear as red tendrils?"

"Red's at the low end of the visible spectrum," Bleys said.

"I told him that already," Kasca said. Bleys nodded and continued.

"I believe that its manifestation of energy is significantly different than that of organic beings. That makes sense." He and Kasca spoke Scientific to each other. I ignored them as best I could.

Since Bleys hadn't really answered my question, I turned to Amirahn.

"Do you have any other forms besides this one?"

"No."

"But what about the red tendrils. Is that you?"

"Yes."

"But that's a different form," I said.

"No."

"But it looks different."

"Yes."

I gave up. Kasca asked a few more questions and managed to incriminate himself further. The Magician seemed to have an endless supply of patience. I suppose that was a good thing, but I was getting tired of hearing "recognize," "irrelevant," and "I must know," as answers to nearly every question.

Apparently Caine was too, for he mumbled something about speaking with the King and vanished in a rainbow flash.

I got a Trump call and took it. It was my uncle Davvaldric, his curly brown and gray hair looking frazzled. He was sitting at his desk in his office.

"Adréano," he said. "I had heard you were in the neighborhood and hoped you might stop by."

I smiled, but I was a little worried. I thought I had been discreet, disguised, and expeditious. How had he known I was in the Courts?

"The Mistress of the House sends her greetings, and said to tell you 'The Serpent is Moving.' I don't know what that means, but I said I would pass the word along. It sounds rather ominous."

"Yes," I agreed. Dav was busy with work, so he closed the connection

soon after that.

The Lady of Whispers had sent me a message. I didn't know what it meant, but that wasn't unusual. To which serpent was she referring? I didn't know. What serpents were my choices? The Church of the Serpent, but that would mean Courts of Chaos politics. Ellyrio had no reason to involve me in that. Furoch and his lady friend were serpents, of a sort. In fact, Suhuy had called the dragon a "Child of the Serpent." Furoch had claimed to have no idea what that meant, and I believed him. That meant it was probably the mythical beast of the Courts. How I was supposed to affect a living myth was beyond me. I decided to just let it rattle around my brain for a while. Maybe the answer would just come to me.

Yeah, right. I would consider myself lucky if it didn't return to bite me in the ass later.

Bleys, Kasca and Furoch had exhausted their questions when I rejoined them.

"What next?" I asked.

"We thought we should take Amirahn to speak with your king," Furoch said.

"Yeah, Random'll want to know about this," Bleys said. He sheathed his sword and took out his Trump deck. "Follow me."

Furoch, Kasca and I went through the connection the old-fashioned way, by touching Bleys as he passed through. Amirahn never touched any of us, but we all knew he had his own means of travel.

One hazy rainbow step later we were in Fiona's laboratory. Every counter was clean and the whole place was tidy. How she ever got anything done like that I had no idea. The witch herself frowned at us and looked particularly displeased.

Bleys and Kasca explained the situation in as few words as possible before Amirahn manifested. Fiona was hesitant to allow Amirahn into her private space, but it turned out she had no choice. The lights dimmed to red and he was there, next to the wall and out of immediate sword range.

He bowed to Fiona and stood perfectly still while arcane energy flashed at her fingertips. Bleys managed to calm her down somewhat. At least, she became calm enough to start asking a million questions. I let Kasca and Bleys answer them and headed for the door. As I opened it, I

looked back to Furoch, but he shook his head and indicated that he would stay.

I thought about stopping in to see Random, but quickly thought better of it. Caine would have prepared him. My presence would only make the situation seem reckless and foolish. I didn't think we had any real choice, but it wasn't my decision. Also, he was less likely to blame me for his problems when I wasn't standing right in front of him.

I went to my chambers and took a nap. Some hour or three later I awoke. I bathed, shaved, and put on a clean and pressed pair of emerald green velvet pants that everyone knew Brand had worn. It kept them guessing how I could possibly have known him since he died before I was born. The truth was that I stole them from storage. I put on a starched white shirt, a deep purple ringmaster jacket with gold highlights, and my gorgeous crimson top hat. High black boots completed the ensemble. I checked all my rings. Everything was in place. I grabbed one of a dozen laptop computers I kept in my closet. It wouldn't work anywhere in Amber except Corwin's tomb, but I felt better having it with me. I was ready.

Now if only I had something to do.

I wandered the castle, knocking on doors. It was still dark, getting toward morning, but nobody seemed to be around. Emi didn't answer. Neither did Rhys, Martin, Merlin, Marcus, or, despite repeated pounding on his door, Corwin.

I ate a large midnight snack and took a leisurely stroll in the Western Garden. I was half-expecting to be summoned to Random's presence, but the guards politely ignored me. I sat on a low stone bench and enjoyed the early morning breeze. It smelled of lilacs and gardenias, with just a hint of fresh grass. Stars poked through holes in the dark cloud cover. The moon hid her face from me.

I figured that someone would notify me when the decision of what to do with Amirahn was made. But would they contact the rest of my generation? Somehow, I doubted that.

I Trumped Rhys. He was moving quickly, riding a horse in the dark.

"Cousin," I said. "I think that you should return to Amber. Amirahn is speaking with Random."

"Yes, I know. We'll be there within the hour. Martin is with me."

There wasn't much to say after that. I hung up and called Emilëa.

I thought I reached her right away, but there was nothing there. However, the connection seemed solid. After a moment, the image in my mind swirled in whites and grays. Then I saw Emi's face in black and white. Behind her, everything was weird gray dots. Even the air seemed to be made of the stuff.

"Emi, you're looking even paler than usual."

"I'm in a hurry, Adré. Is this important?"

Well, if the total lack of color didn't bother her, I wouldn't let it disturb me either. Maybe it was a defense against Mr. Crimson.

"Amirahn is meeting with the king," I told her. "I hope they're going to come to a decision."

"Oh," she looked startled. "We had better hurry."

"What?"

"I wasn't talking to you, cousin. I'll Trump you as soon as I can. Thanks." Her face faded from my mind and I was alone with my thoughts.

Thinking back over everything that had happened in the past week or so, I was forced to admit to myself that Amirahn wasn't our enemy. He had deceived us, spied on us, and learned most of our tricks, but only because he was driven to know absolutely everything. He wasn't human. If Bleys was correct, he wasn't a machine either, despite his robotic mannerisms. He was some semi-sentient form of energy.

He did bear a strong resemblance to Oberon, and he had been sleeping away the centuries in Avalon. Corwin had put in an appearance there also, although I didn't know any details. If that was where he had been living for the past two hundred years, he was undoubtedly very well hidden. No wonder Kasca hadn't found him.

But what about the female dragon, Anya? Her role in this whole affair was suspect. She had encountered Amirahn, wound him up full of intrigue, and pointed him in our direction. Actually, she had sent him

specifically at me.

My fondness for conventional magic was no secret among most of the Amberites and many Chaosians, but how had Anya learned of it? Furoch claimed to have no way to travel between Shadows. He had a Trump card of Rak and one of Kasca, but that was it. His aura was completely alien to me, so I couldn't discern what his abilities really were. Did Anya have some means of cross-Shadow travel that Furoch didn't?

She had been with us the night we first saw Amirahn. It wasn't a coincidence that she had been in Hanno's Place; she was waiting for us. Anya had returned to Kasca's ship with Furoch. The next morning, she wasn't around, but I hadn't given that a moment's thought.

Now I began to wonder.

My thoughts were interrupted by a Trump call from Marcus.

"Dude, you in Amber?"

"Yes, cousin. Why?"

"I need a ride." He held out his hand. I stood up and I pulled him to me. He glanced around once, adjusted his baldric so his huge sword rested more comfortably on his shoulder, and tugged on my jacket.

"Fancy duds," he said. "We gotta go." We began walking quickly back to the castle.

"Where to?"

"I dunno. Someplace important, though. Captain says the Spirits are restless. He wouldn't elaborate. I think he doesn't know but just likes sounding mysterious." He chuckled, then regained his composure. We entered through a side door. "I hope he doesn't learn I said that." He eyed a nearby servant menacingly. The man blanched and looked quickly away.

In the hallways, the staff was waking up. One of the Chatelaine's staff informed us that the King had ordered all members of the Royal Family currently in the castle to attend him immediately. We turned aside and began climbing the stairs to the third floor.

The guards let us in right away, but Random's chambers were empty except for a few kitchen servants picking up trays of half-eaten food, empty glasses, and the usual after-effects of an Amber family get-together. Marcus inhaled four bagels and an entire cantaloupe melon. The King's Head Chambermaid informed us that we had missed the meeting by nearly ten

minutes.

"I was right outside," I protested. "Nobody told me."

"Dudette," Marcus addressed the woman. "Where did they go?"

"The Pattern Room."

He took off at a run. I hurried after him.

We ran down the halls. Servants and guards scurried to get out of Marcus's path. I ran along in his wake as best I could. In a few minutes, I had reached the staircase to the basement.

Marcus took the stairs six at a time. By the time I got to the top he was bounding along four turns ahead of me. Running down the stairs two or three at a time, I stayed close to the wall and hoped I didn't fall.

As I raced down the stairs, I wondered what exactly was happening. I knew someone was walking the Pattern, but it was no ordinary jaunt. Something buzzed and twitched inside me, uncomfortable and disturbing. My feet slid into a rhythm, down, down, down.

Time seemed to creep along. I couldn't stop my mind from flitting around randomly. I wondered what Amirahn really was, and where he had come from. I would have guessed that Oberon had made him and planted him in Avalon. Eventually Kasca had stumbled across him and begun the recent chain of events. Maybe Corwin was involved somehow.

And what of Furoch and Anya? They were different from the Shadow dragons I had known. What did that mean? Where did Anya come from and what did she want? She frightened me a little. I didn't know enough about her.

For no reason I could put my finger on, I thought of my mother. I hadn't seen her in so many years. Would she have changed at all? I couldn't even remember what we were fighting about. Whatever it was, it couldn't have been more important than letting her be a part of her only child's life.

After this was over, I would visit her. Maybe I would stay a few days in her Ways, sit among the wire trees of her steel jungle with her and remember my childhood.

The buzzing inside me grew stronger. I hurried my steps.

Out of breath, shivering for no reason I knew, and scared of what I might find, I jogged as fast as I could through the corridors toward the Pattern room.

The door was open. I paused in the doorway to catch my breath. What I saw wasn't terrifying, but it wasn't particularly reassuring either.

Clustered halfway between the outside line of the Pattern and the door were Random, Vialle, Fiona, Bleys, Martin and Furoch. Further in the chamber I could see Kasca, Llewella, and Rhys conferring together. Marcus reached the King's group as I stood there recovering.

The Pattern itself was spitting up sparks like it does when someone of the Blood walks it. Amirahn was moving upon it. His form wavered and quivered as I approached. Sometimes he looked like himself; more often he was a pulsing red cloud shape with tendrils darting about erratically. Amirahn wasn't an Amberite; he shouldn't have been able to take a single step. I could detect Amber blood and he had none. Of course, he didn't really have any blood at all. Despite my stunning logic, he was walking the Pattern anyway, appearing to be well past the First Veil and approaching the Second.

Every time his shape pulsed, I felt it. The buzzing sensations that had begun while I was descending the stairs were getting stronger. When the sparks flew the highest, my insides trembled. I approached the King and company and saw that Random wore the Jewel of Judgment around his neck. Within the gem, the glowing thread flickered and danced like an electric snake writhing in its coils.

"No, it's not," Fiona said to Random. "I told you it wouldn't be and it isn't."

"There's nothing we can do about it now, though." Random gestured with an unlit cigar. "So just stay alert. That goes for all of you. Keep an eye out."

Fiona looked like she was about to say more, but didn't. She turned abruptly and walked clockwise around the Pattern until she was well away

from everyone.

"I was wondering if you would arrive," Random said to me. "I would hate for you to miss the show."

"Wouldn't be here without you," Bleys grinned at me.

"Thanks."

I said hello and kissed the Queen's hand before continuing on to the other group of relatives. Rhys saw me and shook his head, his shaggy blond hair falling over his face. He held one hand out in futile exasperation toward Amirahn. Llewella looked over her shoulder and smiled at me. She was wearing her Rebma attire, a bathing suit of sorts with silk strips flowing down from the front and back of her waist in some semblance of modesty. She held out her hand and tucked it into the crook of my elbow, ushering me into their little circle.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Adréano," she said in her quiet voice. She kissed me softly on the cheek. I blushed, but I hoped she couldn't detect it because of the Pattern's glow on my face.

"Yeah," Kasca held both hands skyward. "Can you believe it? Random gave his permission."

"Fiona isn't pleased," I said.

"It was inevitable, though." Rhys looked dejected. "There was nothing we could do to stop him."

"That's not a bad thing," Kasca said. "This way, we are controlling Amirahn's actions, not the other way around."

"But that means nothing if he gets what he wants, regardless of your semantic gymnastics." Rhys and Kasca argued on pointlessly.

Llewella pulled me aside and guided our footsteps counter clockwise, as if we were simply strolling along in the marketplace. I shuddered involuntarily and saw that the Crimson Blob was at the Second Veil.

"Have you seen Emilëa?" she asked.

"Yes, only twenty minutes ago, via Trump. She was someplace colorless—all grays, blacks and whites."

"Ahh," Llewella said.

"Where is she?"

"If she had wanted you to know that," my aunt poked my ribs lightly, "she would have told you."

I waited a couple seconds for maximum effect.

"So?" I said with mock indignation. I was rewarded when she laughed.

"Sir, a lady does not reveal another lady's secrets."

"Not when they are her secrets as well," I agreed.

The buzzing inside me changed frequencies and jumped up a step. I stopped walking and clutched at my stomach. Llewella looked at me in alarm but I told her I was okay. Looking up, I saw that the Magician was past the Second Veil.

The Pattern wasn't the same electric blue it had always been; it was darker from the starting point to the Second Veil. I glanced around to see who had noticed. Nearly everyone was staring.

"Oh my," Llewella said. Rhys and Kasca walked over.

"I blame Dworkin," Kasca said.

"We appear to be just in time," a gravelly nasal voice said from directly behind us. I turned and saw Dworkin himself coming toward us with Emilëa beside him. She had a folder containing a sheaf of notes. Dworkin wore a patched and stained robe and leaned on a crooked staff.

He looked out across the Pattern. "So. It begins again. Now if you'll excuse me..."

I grabbed his sleeve before he wandered off.

"Rook takes Knight," I told him. "Check."

"Hmmm," he looked me up and down as if he had no idea who I was. "Knight takes Knight. There's a good boy." He extricated himself from my grasp and shuffled toward Random's group before they all had a chance to descend on him.

Emilëa was deep in conversation with Kasca and Rhys. Llewella nodded farewell to me and followed Dworkin. Fiona had joined Random's group as well and they all grouped around the old man except Furoch, who was coming my way.

"Still interested in how we respond?" I asked him.

"Somewhat," he said. "Or rather one should say, I am interested in how you affect the course of events throughout the entire universe."

"Amirahn seems to be the one doing the cause and effect dance." I twitched again. The Magician was finishing the Grand Curve.

"Cousin, are you alright?" Emi was at my side. Kasca and Rhys weren't far behind.

"I hope so," I said, bending over and leaning against my knees. "I can feel every step he—it, that thing out there, whatever—takes. Can you see the changes?"

"Yes," Rhys said. "The lines are getting darker."

"It's more of a cobalt blue now," Kasca added unnecessarily. "Whereas before it was more of an vivid sapphire."

"This is no time for an art lesson," Emi snapped. "Adréano is in pain."

"Thanks, Emi." I straightened up and forced myself to breathe normally. "I'll be okay as soon as that thing finishes passing through the Pattern."

"Well," Emi got our attention. "I have some fascinating news." She opened her sheaf of papers and selected one upon which were drawn approximately twenty strange symbols. The second from the top was the same I had seen on the base of the Mezzone Amirahn's skull.

"These are a series of pre-Thari numbers," she said. "In a language ostensibly spoken by Furoch's people before recorded history."

We looked at Furoch. He seemed chagrinned, but shrugged his shoulders apologetically.

"I knew the language existed," he said, "but I have never had the opportunity or the means to learn it."

"No one is blaming you," Emi said. She held the paper out so we could all see it. We moved closer to her and gathered around.

"This symbol here," she indicated the one I recognized, "is for the second number in the series."

"The number two?" Kasca said.

"Not exactly, but close enough. The draconic numbering system is a base eight system, evolving from squared numbers. So a closer parallel to our system would be the number four, although there is only one number preceding it."

"Is the preceding number one or two?" Kasca asked.

"Pay attention," Emi scolded him. I convulsed again and again. It

wouldn't stop. Amirahn was negotiating the Final Veil. Furoch helped steady me.

"There are sixteen symbols in the set," Emilëa said. "The higher numbers depend on a curious juxtaposition, but that isn't relevant yet."

"Yet?" Rhys said quietly. Emi ignored him and continued with her lecture.

"I also found reference to Amirahn's name."

"I knew it!" Kasca exclaimed. "Math determines everything."

"Just like the numbering system, his name is prehistoric draconic."

Oh no. I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"It's quite simple. 'Rahn' means number," Emi said.

"And 'Ami'?" Rhys asked.

"'Ami' means four."

"There are three other guys like this out there somewhere?" Kasca said.

"No," Emi replied. "Let me finish."

She pointed at the first symbol on the paper. "This is the symbol for two, the first number in the set."

I leaned forward, my shoulders tensed. Emi looked all of us in the eye.

"It's name is 'Ober,' as in 'Ober-Rahn.'"

Rhys groaned. Kasca slapped himself on the forehead. I clenched my jaw and tried to keep my head from splitting apart. Amirahn was almost through the Final Veil.

"Amirahn is the second in the series," Kasca said. "Was Oberon the first?"

"We don't know that for certain," Emi said, "but the preponderance of evidence would seem to lead to that conclusion."

I tried to ask her a question, but my mouth didn't work. Needles of pain shot out from my stomach.

"But Oberon was an Amberite, like us." Rhys protested.

"Not like us," Emi said. "He was much more."

"But he was human, right?"

"Who knows?"

"Are there going to be any more Rahn-beings?" Kasca asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I wish I did."

At that point, further discussion became impossible. The scarlet Amirahn cloud passed through the Final Veil, quickly flew the short distance to the end, and vanished with a loud whooshing implosion. I felt a pull, like my heart was being ripped out. Everyone in the chamber jerked and fell to the ground.

I collapsed to my knees with relief. My laptop computer fell to the floor beside me. I felt better, somewhat. The buzzing was gone, but I wasn't exactly back to normal. Something was different. I looked up. Aw crap, I thought. The Pattern was glowing a bright, royal purple.

Furoch fell to the ground beside me. His body changed, shifted. His clothes ripped and fell away as he transformed into a fifty-foot-long black, winged serpentine dragon. A bright blue tongue darted out from between nasty sharp teeth as he writhed on the floor far too close to me for comfort. He was much bigger than I had expected.

"Well done, my girl." Dworkin was standing next to Emiĕa's sprawled form. He blinked and smiled down at her. "Don't feel bad."

"Yessss," a new voice said. It was feminine, deep, and full of satisfaction. "Vvery well indeed."

"Anyalirrikelleh." Dworkin regarded someone behind me through half-closed eyes. "I guess Suhuy was right after all."

"He thinks he knowsss, but he knows nothinggg," she said.

I looked over and saw her. It was Anya, dressed head to toe in black, form-fitting clothing. Her eyes were bright yellow, the pupils vertical dark slits.

Around her neck was a fist-sized amethyst, lit by a glowing line within it. I glanced over at Random's unconscious form. His neck was empty; the Jewel wasn't there.

She sauntered slowly toward me, her heels clicking against the stone floor and echoing incongruously loud throughout the entire chamber. Forty feet away, Random and crew were lying in slow-moving heaps, struggling to regain consciousness.

Kasca crawled toward me. He gave up and sat down.

"Why?" He croaked at Anya.

"I am merely the agent of necessity," she said, stopping to pet him

like a dog. "I have waited thousands of yearsss." She craned her neck sinuously. "The wheel turns. None can resist it." Kasca tried to hold on to her and failed. She took one step toward me, then another, moving slowly enough that I had time to feel the sweat break out all over my body. My heart began racing. Beside me, Furoch's struggles ceased. He rolled over and turned his head to watch.

"Ssstop," Anya said, and flung her hand toward the place where Rhys was struggling to get up. He abruptly ceased moving and fell down. "I am not your enemy, Amberites. The rules of the universe have simply changed." She took three more slow steps, then she was standing above me. It was all I could do to keep from sliding over and falling to the cold stone floor.

"What are you?" I said.

"We... are your new... masterssss." She threw back her head and hissed. Her clothing shredded. Her form grew and grew until she was a great black dragon, half again as long as Furoch. Her scales shimmered with every color in the spectrum. The links on the necklace lengthened, the purple Jewel resting on her chest.

Her wings unfurled and she flapped them once. The air rushed across my body. She flapped her wings again, and again. The rush of wind pushed me down to the floor. Above me, she rose gracefully and flew toward the ceiling of the chamber. Furoch stirred, heaved his bulk into the air, and flew after her.

"Furoch!" I called after him. He turned his long serpentine neck and regarded me with one yellow, reptilian eye.

The female dragon roared as she soared ever higher. The roar battered at my ears. I covered them as the noise rebounded against the rough stone walls, but it wasn't enough. Electric green light crackled across the surface of the dragons. When the echo died, both dragons were gone.

I lay down and closed my eyes until the pain in my ears lessened. When I looked up, Kasca was staring at me.

"I never liked her," he said.

I smiled and we helped each other stand up. Across the room, Llewella was puttering around, making sure everyone was still breathing. Most of them were unconscious, as was Rhys. Emilëa was crawling toward

us. We lifted her between the two of us and looked at the Pattern.

It glowed slightly, noticeably less than it normally had when quiescent. Small sparks danced along its length. It looked smaller somehow, the lines narrower than a hand's-breadth.

Kasca and I, supporting Emi between us, slowly made our way to the edge of the Pattern. We lowered ourselves gently to the floor and stretched out beside it.

"Red and blue make purple," Kasca said, "where the light waves overlap. It almost matches your jacket."

I touched the fabric of my lapel. It was soft and smooth. I hesitated, then charged carelessly ahead.

"Here goes nothing," I said, and touched the purple glowing line. A faint jolt of energy shot up my finger and through my whole body—but I wasn't instantly incinerated.

Inside me, my Pattern shifted, adjusting. I tried to sense it and discovered that it was faint and distant.

It was weak.

"All roads lead to Amber no longer," Dworkin said. He was standing to our left, just off the edge of the Pattern. Then he walked across it like it was just a cobblestone path. He cast his eyes down as he walked and a tear fell into the Great Design. "The Serpent has moved on."

"What do you mean?" Kasca asked.

He turned a face toward us that was full of sorrow.

"Everything that rises shall fall. It is the way."

Emi coughed, cleared her throat. "What of the dragons?"

Dworkin looked up. The purple light cast his shadow across the vault of the chamber.

"This is their time," he whispered.

An hour later we all stood on the front steps of the Castle. They were brittle and cracked. The whole building had aged hundreds of years since we had descended to the basement.

A cold wind brought the tang of salt air to us, with just a hint of dead fish, the smell of decay. The ocean was a glass table, free of waves as far as the eye could see.

But it wasn't the same. The water was darker, a richer shade of

blue. Above us the sun was rising, spilling orange and pink clouds across the sky. The pink was duller, and the orange was lighter than before.

Even the grass in the courtyard wasn't the same shade of green.

And in the far distance, between the watery horizon and the rosy hues of dawn, long dark shapes danced in the air. I couldn't see them well enough to make out what they were, but I knew.

Todd Worrell:

Todd Worrell has lived most of his life in beautiful, rainy Oregon, except for two years spent toiling in Manhattan, New York. He has been a professional musician, actor, and bookstore clerk, although he has spent most of his recent life as a business trainer. He likes chocolate chip cookies, puppies, and sleeping late.

As a Gamemaster, what do you do when only two players show up for the first game, another player can only play on the wrong days, one player's wife later decides she wants to play, then one of the original players switches his character after the first game? I wasn't sure either, so I wrote an NPC's journal to fill in background information for the players. Thus was born chapter one of Adréano's story. The players all read it and thought Adréano was useful enough that they dragged him around to most of the major events in the game. I wrote chapters two and three recently, many years later.

Boris Sirbey:

Boris Sirbey's word about himself: I am a French illustrator and comic book artist, born in Paris in 1976. I discovered the Amber universe when I was 16. (I remember I was supposed to take a French literature exam but I spent all my revision time reading the Amber novels!) I started to play Amber DRPG as soon as it was published in France, and created a Trump deck in 1998. I'm currently working as a part-time RPG illustrator, among other obscure and unspeakable activities...

My website: www.sirbey.com

A Secret of Amber

By Ed Greenwood

"It was starting to end," the book—THE book—began. Mildly interested (my father's study was chock-full of all sorts of books, and each new opening of pages might reveal just about anything), I read on.

By "Where the hell was I?" I was hooked.

Let thirty-some years blow past, and come to a standstill now. On a height, looking down into Arden, with a silver blade in one hand and the cold tingling of Trumps in the other.

I'm still hooked. I think I always will be. I want to believe that Amber is real, and that this place is just a Shadow.

Over those years, I read and re-read *Nine Princes In Amber*—and as each new novel came out, I and my best friend Dave devoured it, walked the parks near our homes for hours speculating as to who among the Royals was behind what attack, and making untrustworthy alliance with whom.

I wrote my own books. I dared to travel to sf conventions. There came a day when a man with glasses as severe as my own sat at a table, signing the books a long line of fans thrust eagerly at him. I was one of them, and the book was my father's precious copy of *Nine Princes*.

And he swung it open at my bookmark.

My bookmark, foolishly left inside. 'Foolishly' because it bore these words of mine:

She raised an eyebrow. "I thought better of you, brother.

It seems I was wrong."

I sipped my wine. "It seems you were. Again."

Silence. She raised the other brow.

I gave her more silence.

"Well, Corwin?"

"Disappointment," I observed, over the rim of my glass. "is a beast that runs in packs."

And the Lord of Amber looked up from my scribbles and smiled. "Fiona," he said. It was not a question, but I nodded and grinned like an idiot. He flashed me a grin just as wide, and wrote:

"Whereas wit is a bird that eludes the hand of rather too many princes."

I shrugged. "Your disapproval concerns me even less than usual, Fi. All things considered."

She tossed her head, red hair like a fall of flame. "Yet perhaps it should. All things considered."

I did things with my own eyebrows, emptied my glass, swung my boots down from the table, and headed for the door.

She chuckled, behind me.

I stopped, refrained from turning, and waited. Fiona could never resist showing the rest of us that she was a step ahead. Or pretending to be.

"You are wearing your blade," she said. "Good."

I went out, uttering no clever comments. With at least three murderous ghosts stalking Castle Amber, the time for such things was past.

He looked up from hand book and bookmark back to me, and laughed when he saw my badge, and my name on it.

"Yes," I mumbled, "I'd been meaning to speak to you about that. The hospital—"

"Let you out for the day. Glad you came." Again the smile.

"Well, uh, thanks. See you next year," I said, and meant it.

He never signed the book, I realized later, but I had that precious bookmark—and an idea. I thought long and hard, and then carefully wrote under Roger's words:

Lightning struck Kolvir. somewhere outside the windows. as I made my way back to my room. I saw no one.

There was a fire going on the grate. and everything was as I had left it. Which meant drink of my choosing was handy. I chose generously.

Full of good spirits. I cracked a better book and waited for whatever spirits might come.

Let a year blow by, more than one, but in time there was another con, and another table, and Roger's latest, glossy and new. I handed it to him open, with the bookmark in it.

He looked up at me with an almost fierce grin, looked down again to read what I'd written, and then wrote under it:

It was very late, or rather early, before one of the walls opened in a place where it should not have done, and something that was both silver and shadow joined me.

Grayswandir felt good in my hand as I put down what I was finished drinking anyway, and waited.

Patience, they say, is chiefly a virtue for statues, but I'd made more than my share of mistakes, thus far, and blood is hell to get out of good rugs.

Came a whisper, out of darkness: "Corwin. Is it time?"

Another year, another new Amber book, and by then I'd penned my feeble few under Roger's:

So it knew me. You have the advantage. and all that. Time for what?

"No." I said very firmly. "Go away."

A stirring of silver, rising before me. "I fear not, Prince of Amber. I must have the blood I came for." The whisper was close, and hungry, and utterly unfamiliar.

I stepped back, slicing the air before me with my blade. "Suppose you tell me why. And your name, while you're at it."

The reply was a chuckle that did seem familiar, somehow, in the moment before the shadows boiled up into half a dozen stabbing, slashing blades, and Grayswandir rang in protest, sparks flying around me.

I considered some obscenities and then discarded them all.

Fiona had been ahead of me. Again.

"The Fool Prince," she'd called me once. And would again, if I was lucky enough in these next few panting minutes. Or swift enough.

Lightning struck the Castle, somewhere nearby. Which itself should not have happened, what with the enchantments—

A swordpoint melted back into shadow, and then another, and my blade bit into nothing beyond.

A nothing that spilled silver out across my floor, scorching the rugs with sudden plumes of smoke.

"Prince of Amber!" my visitor hissed in pain. "You fight well!"

I struck again.

A handful of years, and another con, both of us visibly older now, but the grin as sharp as ever.

Roger sat back to read the whole thing through, this time, then reached out and shook my hand. Then without a pause he wrote:

And shadows fled before me, and I was alone.

My book was on the floor, blackened. Damn. I watched lightning flicker and wondered if I would ever know what I fought, or why. Family politics seemed as

tiresome as ever.

Three ghosts, Benedict had said, and had been on the brink of saying more ere his face had smoothed and he'd turned away. Which meant he'd recognized the one he'd seen.

So had the lamplighter, before the ghost that slew him caught up with him and burned his skull bare, from within.

Coln had died, before that, and one of the cooks. Seven maids, or more by now, since.

Then they'd started on us. Flora had almost fallen to one, and then Julian. Almost.

We're tough meat, we of Amber.

I laughed at that, and so did he. I went home and pondered for some months before I wrote:

My wall was as solid as ever. so I got out a lantern. and went looking for trouble. Something 'Princes of Amber never do. according to one of 'Oroppa's little ditties.

Ho ho.

"'Oo not be too hasty." 'Oad had told me once. when I'd broken something in a rage at 'Eric. 'But then. a lot had changed since 'Oad's disappearance.

A lot. indeed. I was descending a stair when shadows and silver spun up again. 'Below' me and above me. to the accompaniment of ghostly laughter.

I sighed. It was going to be one of those nights.

And when next our paths seemed fated to cross, it was to be at a GenCon where Roger Zelazny was to be Guest of Honor, and I'd be on my usual panels, plus one with him.

I was looking forward to a pleasant hour or so of passing that bookmark—two panels long, now, and I planned to bring more with me—back and forth along the table as we answered questions and held gentle

debate, and really getting into the tale.

Our own little foray into Amber. May I have this dance, please? Yes, I'll have the same again, thanks!

But whatever gods there be had other ideas. Roger never made it into the summer, and now I'll never know how it would have turned out.

Damn it all.

But thank you, Roger. Thank you.

Thank you, Lord of Amber.

Ed Greenwood:

Ed Greenwood is known to the world as an incredibly prolific and talented writer, creator of the 'Forgotten Realms,' and lots of other stuff (google his name for more complete lists). Ed is known to Phage Press as a tremendous fan and morale booster, sure to show up at our booth at every Gencon, with a ready smile and epic words of encouragement. Thanks, Ed, for sharing your treasured Zelazny experiences!

Carl Yoke:

Carl Yoke, Associate Professor of English at Kent State University, is Roger Zelazny's lifelong friend and frequent biographer. In one of Carl's on-line bibliographies, http://faculty.trumbull.kent.edu/faculty/fac.asp?strdept=ENG, there are more than three dozen writings and talks on Roger. As for his relationship with Roger, Carl's own words sum it up best; "Before we could drive, we would ride our bikes to old book stores..."

(Ed: Carl Yoke's remembrance essay begins on the next page...)

Over the Sangre de Cristos

By Carl Yoke

Morning exploded in the east and the sky slowly filled with blood. How appropriate, I thought, as I left the old, red-brick buildings of the business section of east Ravenna, passed the sprawling high school, the well-kept lawns of the century homes through an arch of towering, old oaks, the strip malls on both sides of route #5, and a kaleidoscope of dew-covered cars from new and used lots north and south of the road. The trailer park, broken and bloodstained by the morning light was the last thing I passed before I raced into the open countryside towards the Ravenna Arsenal and West Branch Reservoir.

I had decided to teach my critical writing course. I needed the distraction. It deadened the pain of yet another loss. I had been up most of the night. I had wept, I had drunk endless Tangueray and tonics, and I had watched unnamed movies on cable until I simply fell asleep from exhaustion.

Now I drove in a daze. My head throbbed dully. My body was lead. I moved through wet sand. I might as well have been a deep-sea diver in one of those metal suits that preceded Aqua Lungs. My stomach churned. I felt nauseous.

Jane Lindskold had called a little after ten o'clock, my time, the night before, to tell me that Roger had died about two o'clock the previous afternoon (New Mexico time). I don't know if I thanked her then for her conscientiousness, but if I did not and she reads this, I would like to thank her now for letting me know so quickly, for not letting me find out about it through the grapevine, or the newspapers, or the Internet. I was stunned, I was shocked, and I was numb. All I could do was haul out all the old clichés, all the awful words that never help. I wished that I had the talent to express how I truly felt, but no one has the talent to do that. No words, no matter how beautiful, have ever been able to blunt the impact of the death of someone close to me.

It's been almost a month now, and I'm still trying to wrestle the idea to the ground. I can't imagine a world without Roger in it. He and I had vowed to live forever. Death was not permitted. I had known him for almost 52 years, longer than I have known anyone else on this planet other than my mother.

In the week that followed Jane's call, I could think of nothing else but Roger. A few people remembered my connection with him and called to see how I was doing: Erick Wujcik, Steve Donaldson, Todd Rickle, Roger Schlobin, Bill Senior, and Mary Turzillo. I greatly appreciate their support. My wife, Sherry, and my daughter, Andrea, were my main sources of solace, and for that I love them.

As the pain dimmed some, I was flooded with memories of Roger, most of them from our early years. There were the walks down to Lake Erie from his house on E. 250 that lasted all night, reading *Pogo* and *Li'l Abner*, watching *Mr. Peepers*, cooperatively doing crossword puzzles, him getting into trouble for hypnotizing a girl in speech class who later kept falling asleep, me getting into trouble because he and Bob Zevin, another friend, conned me into writing a satirical account of our woefully poor high school football team for the local, weekly newspaper, the bus trip we took to California before out senior year, the all-night walk in Death Valley trying to get to the Panamint Mountains so we could hunt for flying saucers, living on chocolate milk shakes, climbing Morrow Rock, going to the sulfur baths at Paso Robles, going to the Spiritualist Church in Euclid to see what it was all about, leaving yoga and the Eastern religions, swimming at Mentor Headlands with our mutual friend Dick Covert, sharing our college experiences.

A couple of nights after I learned of his death, I couldn't sleep, so I surfed through the cable channels and came across Alec Guiness in *The Lavender Hill Mob*. Roger liked Guiness and many of the British comedy films of the 50's like the *Doctor in the House* series. *Lavender Hill* was a film that Roger loved, so I watched it again, simultaneously read some W.S. Merwin poetry and *Grim Jack* comic books, and drank Inglenook White Zinfandel until I fell asleep. It was my personal wake for Roger.

I remember a lot about him. He once played Snidely Whiplash in *The Admirable Crichton*, he shot off a bottle rocket out of my dad's car

window one night burning a hole in the seat and leaving powder burns on his hand so bad that he eventually had to go to the emergency room. He and I ate wild Concord grapes in the open fields behind his house.

When he left northeastern Ohio for Baltimore, our physical contact greatly reduced, but we did see one another periodically and we did talk on the phone. And there were his long, single-spaced letters. We talked about writing, about science fiction, about poetry; we talked about our families, our accomplishments, and our defeats. We speculated on the nature of the universe and the meaning of life.

Roger was my loyal and generous friend. We thought a great deal alike. I could track and develop an idea for several months, even years, and when I finally shared my thinking with him, I found that he had reached most of the same conclusions that I had, though sometimes by following a very different path. I have been around universities for more than thirty years and met and talked to some of the best minds there. No one was more intelligent. No one was more creative. No one was more curious. No one read more in so many different fields. He was my intellectual stimulus, my mental lifeline.

Roger was a romantic, yet he could be tough-minded. There was always a wild card in his being, something that made him special. He was the one who got a message when went to the Spiritualist Church. He was the one who got yet another message from Myrus the Magician at the old Vine Theatre in Willougby. He was the one who discovered Githa, a gypsy seer who gave him advice in the early days that actually seemed to be true. He nearly got us killed several times with his erratic driving; he nearly killed himself once by alcohol poisoning. He was the one who gave up everything time and again to succeed at writing. Physically awkward at a young age, he overcame his erratic movements through sheer force of will to win a varsity letter as a fencer for Western Reserve University and to earn a black belt in karate.

But the wild card also had a down side. He tried briefly to be a college teacher, only to find that he could not take the routine. He failed a collect accounting course once because he didn't know that he had to de-register himself to officially leave the class. He nearly failed to earn his Master's Degree from Columbia because he could not get along with his

thesis adviser. But these are human failings, and no one was more human than he was.

Everything that Roger learned and did, everyone he met led to one goal — his writing. He never wanted to be anything else. He was *not* a great science fiction writer. He was *not* a great fantasy writer. He was simply *a great writer.* He had original ideas and he was a master craftsman. Everything he wrote showed his superior skill.

I understand that he was cremated and his ashes were scattered over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. He loved those mountains, and through his office window, he watched the days pass into night and the seasons flee across their faces. His letters usually began with a description of the conditions of the mountains at the time. He sat there, drank coffee, watched the weather forming, thought great thoughts, and turned beautiful stories on the wheel of his mind. His writing was graceful, eloquent, and profound.

Those of us who care will always wonder what other gems he might have written.

He is now the whisper of the wind in the pines, the gurgle of brooks racing down the mountains, the sound of the night creatures in the bush, the howl of a lonesome wolf beneath a full moon. When I hear those sounds, no matter where, I will think of the poet, I will think of him, I will remember how I loved him.

I will try to finish all those stories that he encouraged me to finish. But first, I will write the last "Record" story as a tribute to him. These stories, which we wrote in junior high and high school, were about the irreverent and irrepressible Yok and Zlaz monsters, who were quintessential anti-heroes, always in trouble; they managed to persevere, but in winning the battle often left things worse than they were. These stories were one of the things we shared exclusively.

Sleep well, my old friend!

(Ed: Carl Yoke's biographical notes can be found on page 373.)

Catfight

By Terry O'Brien
Illustrated by Michael Kucharski

"By your command, Your Majesty, I will formally relate my involvement in the events of earlier this night."

I was standing before Random in his private audience chambers, with Benedict and the Captain of the Guards sitting attentively on either side of him. The old tomcat I had nicknamed 'Growltiger' lay under Random's idly-scratching hand on Random's lap, and two German Shepards and a Mastiff lay curled on the floor at the three's feet. Off to one side, an impatient but slow scribe with quill pen and parchment sat ready to take down my every word: what I wouldn't have given then for a transcriber, or even a typewriter! Random signaled his acceptance; I took a deep breath and began speaking.

Well, Your Majesty, I think it all started for me when I was asleep in bed, in my room up on the third floor, dreaming about playing the opening theme to Cats on my steel guitar—no, not "Memories," although I have sung that, but the actual theme. That's when I heard a cat meowing in tune, and I knew I wasn't dreaming that.

I opened my eyes and peered down at the foot of the bed: in what little light there was, after I adjusted my night vision to compensate, I could see Tab sitting on the bed frame, meowing and staring at me. "Tab, what's up?"

I'm sorry, your Majesty? How did I know the cat's name? Oh, that. Well, I guess I should start my tale a little earlier.

A couple of days ago, the afternoon I arrived, to be specific, I went

prowling the castle. I had decided to experiment with shape shifting, too, and turned myself into a cat. I thought it would be easier to poke around if I was something inconspicuous. I finally got the shape right, but it took me a while, and I still didn't lose any weight: it would have been a big surprise to anyone who wanted to pick me up.

Anyway, having spent some time wandering the upper floors, I ended following this wonderful cooking smell down to the kitchens, where I saw this line of cats waiting outside the door. Yeah, a line: an orderly line of cats. I didn't believe it either when I first saw it. There was this one old cat near the head of the line lording over everyone—yeah, him, the one on your lap, Your Majesty—he signaled to the others to give me a place in line and at his table in the kitchens.

Inside, the Head Cook treated him almost as if he were royalty, which I guess he was. Afterward, while he was holding court, he personally welcomed me as one of the Kindly Ones to his court. (Yeah, he spoke to me, and, as a cat, I could understand him, and all the other cats, too; I should be used to that, since I had a telepathic talent for languages in my home shadow, but this unexpected communication still surprised me.) I thanked him for his hospitality and told him that if he ever needed my assistance, he could call on me at any time, and I would come. Then I left to do some more exploring, this time in human form; when I said good-bye, he detailed one of his people—Tab specifically, for one—to follow me.

After our dinner, I went exploring the castle grounds and further; I adjusted my vision so that even the dim moonlight was as easy to see by as daylight. In passing, I made the acquaintance of several of the dogs of the castle: besides cats, I've always had a strong association with dogs and wolves for some reason. I noticed the cats stopped following me when I approached the kennels, but I wasn't really surprised.

The dogs in the kennel were happy to see me, although they somehow seemed to notice the scent of cats on me, because they reacted a little strangely, the way they circled and sniffed around me before finally approaching. Once close, however, they were about as friendly a bunch of dogs as I've ever seen: this from someone who used to work as a volunteer at the animal shelter as a kid. The kennel master remarked that I must be of the Blood to have the dogs react in such a way to a person.

Yes, Your Majesty, this is all relevant. I'll explain in a minute.

So, where was I? Oh, yeah, staring at Tab, who was sitting there on the bed frame and meowing at me. Like I said, I asked him what the matter was, as he sounded pretty upset about something, and then I remembered that he couldn't understand me as a human. Well, I shifted down to cat shape and repeated the question.

"His Majesty urgently requests the assistance of the Lady of the Kindly Ones," he said. Then he bounded off the bed frame and ran out the door.

In cat form I found it a lot harder to swarm through the pile of furs and quilts I had piled on my bed. Finally I just leaped towards the door, hitting the ground running halfway across the room and bolting out. I caught up with Tab around the corner just down the hall. It was only then that I noticed that there were a lot of cats running about, in two different directions: a few older cats went past

us running the other way while shooing a herd of kittens, while we were following a mob of the younger ones.

Tab led me down to the throne room. There Growltiger, the King of Cats, was sitting on your throne. Yes, Your Majesty, that's the name I gave him, but it fits him, doesn't it?

"Your Majesty, I have brought the Lady of the Kindly Ones," announced Tab. I stepped up beside him.

The old King of Cats looked down at me. "Lady, Twisted Tail, the King of Rats, is leading his armies against the Feline Kingdom and the Kingdom of the Kindly Ones. We have already repulsed one of his feints against the kitchens, but he is now massing his forces for an attack on my forces and on the throne room itself.

"Would you aid us in the defense of your home?"

I admitted that I would be proud to do so. He motioned me into a place against the throne, on the top step, alongside his best. Around us he placed four more rings of ten or twelve cats each, all grizzled-looking fighters.

We didn't have long to wait: from behind the curtains, out of holes in the walls, through half-open doors, came the horde of rats, followed by the huge King of Rats himself, stepping out of the door leading down to the kitchens. A couple of the cats looked at me like I had gone crazy, but I couldn't help laughing at the sight: I kept thinking of *The Nutcracker Suite*. That is, until I saw the Rat King.

The King of Rats was about the size of a medium-sized dog, much bigger than any cat present, and fat. He waddled unsteadily on his hind legs while holding a scepter-thing in his front paws. Between his legs I could see the reason for his name: his tail was twisted and broken in three places. He stared at the cats and me with red beady little eyes, and then he waved the scepter in front of him. That's when the six smaller versions of him showed up out of the darkness behind him. "My children," he said with a hiss.

They were slightly bigger than of any of the cats, with yellow front teeth as long as my little finger. They were mangy, too, and smelled of the sewers. They surrounded the Rat King and hissed their defiance at the cats.

The Cat King stood up on the throne. "Go back to your dens,

now, or you will not live to see them ever again." The Rat King just sneered in response as the two armies faced off. There were as many rats as cats, but the darkness behind the Rat King could hold ten times more and we'd never see them. At least I couldn't see them, even though I shifted my eyesight down to the IR range for a moment. There was a lot of shuffling and tense movement, then all at once both sides charged each other.

There were fights and battles all through the hall as the first two rings of cats met the rats full on. The innermost ring split up and attacked in pairs and threes, and even old Growltiger leaped down from the throne into the fight, leaving me alone on the dais. I sort of had the idea that he wanted me to keep an eye on Twisted Tail and his Children, that this was my purpose for being called. It looked to me like that they were waiting for some signal to enter combat, so I thought I'd give them one. Both sides were about even when I decided it was time for me to make an entrance.

"Nuada, do your stuff!" I thought, and I leaped from a standing start halfway across the room into the biggest knot of advancing rats in sight, killing a couple just by landing on them, then started swatting left and right. I must have killed a dozen rats in about as many seconds, swinging with my paws left and right. Sorry about the windows, though: I didn't know just how far they would fly when I did a full wind-up before swinging at them. I'd say the falling dead bodies into the courtyard outside were what alerted the guards, though.

Just like I had been expecting, that's when one of the Rat King's children jumped me. He tried gnawing away at me but slid off of Nuada's shield. He was a tough little prick, I'll give him that: I wasn't hurting him with my paws any more than he was hurting me, when I just decided to end the fight by shifting my paws into hands and wringing his neck. He joined the others out the window. Before anyone else could move, I leaped across the room and did the same with one of his brothers. After that, all the rats backed away from me.

All except the Rat King, that is. While the rats kept the other cats busy, he advanced down an aisle of his subjects towards me. "You will pay for killing my children," he boasted. Gods and goddesses, his breath stank. I just smiled in return. I didn't pay him much mind: I've been threatened with a lot worse by the best.

He swung his scepter at me. I instinctively brought up my arm to block it, and it cut through Nuada's shield like it wasn't there! It actually cut me! Not a lot can do that, so I stayed pretty wary of it for the rest of the fight. I couldn't avoid it completely, but I wasn't going to let him get a good shot in on me.

I found out pretty quickly that he wasn't as strong as I was with Nuada's help, but he was canny enough not to let me catch him like I did his kids. He must have found I was pretty tough myself, as he hit me several glancing blows with that scepter and couldn't seriously hurt me: any one of those blows would have killed any of the cats. Most of the wounds he inflicted I could have healed quickly, but he cut me a couple times really good and the last one on my hand was a bleeder that I didn't have the time or concentration to close off immediately. That's when I decided to pull a fast one on him.

I backed off a step, then leaped at him, growing to full size, from cat to panther. The rush knocked his scepter away and I started to lock my teeth on his throat, but he shifted himself to get away. The little bastard was a shape shifter, too!

He stared at me. "Who are you?" he said, real low and menacing. "Whoever you are, you will die tonight."

I couldn't help it. I laughed in his face: I'd faced certain death from supervillains and alien horrors in my time, and, believe me, this wasn't even close. "I'm the Lady Griddlebone," I replied. While I was talking, I took the time to heal my wounds, but I was still pretty bloody-looking.

We faced off, circling as the fighting surrounded us. Then, like on a signal, we both jumped at each other at the same time, meeting in midair. I raked my claws down his side, and he shrieked!

He backed away, burning! He was holding his side, and I could see little blue flames coming out of the scratches I'd made!

"You are of Amber!" he yelled. I just grinned in reply.

The four remaining children of the Rat King ran over to stand around him in a tight group, surrounded by a host of other rats. As good as I was, I didn't feel up to taking on all five, especially when I noticed that one of his Children had retrieved Twisted Tail's scepter.

Instead, I rejoined Growltiger and the other cats on the throne and

looked around. Dozens of rats were dead across the floor, and here and there, the body of a cat, but most of Growltiger's forces were still standing. Unfortunately, there were still at least a dozen rats for every remaining cat, maybe two dozen. They circled the dais while the cats hissed and spat, daring them to come closer.

That's when I thought that I could hear something faint, something just out of range, and I noticed that the other cats could hear it too. I shifted my hearing range up, and there, in the distance, was a long howling coming from the Great Hall.

Even the rats could hear it, now, and they started advancing: small fights were breaking out again as knots of rats took on single cats.

Growltiger looked at me. "The doors!" he said. "Help is coming! Open the doors or we will be lost!"

I looked over at the main doors to the Great Hall: they were shut and bolted tight, beyond the reach of any cat to loosen or open. Between us and those doors was a sea of rats. There was no way I'd get over there on the ground quickly, and I didn't think I could manage to shift into a flying form on the spur of the moment. However, there was one way I could get there in time.

I've always been able to teleport back in my home Shadow, but I'd never tried it here. All it is, I think, is shape shifting from mass to energy and back to mass again. Nothing to it. I stared at the doors and focused myself, just like all of my teachers had taught me: ground and center, focus on the target. Then I just pushed.

I'm told that the moment I disappeared there was a brilliant green flash of light throughout the entire room, and that I reappeared a moment later in human shape beside the doors to the Great Hall. I don't know: I was a little woozy at the time, but I still had enough will to throw the bolts and fling open the doors.

That's when the dogs poured through, led by three huge coal-black hounds with fiery eyes, flanked by a dozen German Shepards I recognized from the kennels. After them rushed in about every kind of dog I'd ever seen in the castle or the town: Wolfhounds and Dachshunds, Labs and Peeks; big dogs, little dogs; hunting dogs, pampered pets, mutts. A veritable wave of dogs.

At the sight of the dogs, the Rat King retreated all the way to the far wall, sending his Children and the other rats out before him to protect himself. It didn't do any good. The dogs went through the massed rats like a tidal wave.

The rats could have survived against the cats because of their numbers, but they didn't stand a chance against the dogs. One bite, or one swing or stamp of a paw, and one more rat bit the dust. The dogs were killing rats as fast as I could've, and there were a lot more of them. The cats returned to the fight, too, dodging around and in between the dogs' legs, chasing down rats that were hiding where the dogs couldn't reach and herding them back into the fight.

When they had finally broken through the surrounding rats, the black hounds took on the Children, one apiece, while the fourth Child was set upon by a big brown Mastiff who took its throat while this Whippet grabbed its hind legs: together, they played tug-of-war with the rat as their rope. Even given their parentage, the Children couldn't withstand the attack.

I tried shifting back into cat shape, but apparently I was still too tired from teleporting. I managed to shift down, but I kept seeing double; by the time I felt strong enough to fight, I could see that the rats were retreating.

With the cats now reinforced, and without the Children, and with the Rat King himself still hurting from the cuts I'd given him, the remaining rats really had no other choice but to retreat. They cut and ran for the doorways and ratholes, out of reach of the cats and dogs, and the first one to flee was the Rat King himself. Good riddance.

Within a minute, the battle (and the war) was over. Some of the cats and dogs were dragging their wounded away towards a cleared area around the throne, while others searched through the bodies of the rats to finish off any survivor.

When it was over, one of the German Shepards approached Growltiger. "Your Majesty, by the Pact of the Ancients, in defense of the Castle, we have come," he said.

"Your timing is excellent as ever, Baron Sharptooth," Growltiger replied politely.

That's when another of those black hounds walked in, carrying another of the Children in its jaws, flanked by Flora's two Borzois and

followed by a host of smaller dogs and a wave of old and young cats.

"The Count and Countess Romanov pled their case most eloquently for us to come aid you," said the Baron, looking at the two Borzois, "but it needed little pleading. The Canine Assembly of Nobles respects the Pact."

The two Borzois joined the Baron. "The Rat King sent a detachment to attack the nursery, where the kittens and old cats had been sent to hide in safety," the Countess said, "but we have prevailed: your young are safe." The black hound laid the body of the dead Child at the foot of the dais as mute proof.

The other dogs had joined the Baron and the Count and Countess before the King, and there was a general sharing of introductions and congratulations: Count and Countess Romanov, Duke Preychaser, and Sergeant Hellsbreath (the last being the black hound with the fiery eyes who had carried the dead Child) of the Canine Assembly of Nobles, and Captains Tab, Pouncer, and Racket of the Cat King's Guard. Everyone was introduced, except for me.

When all of the introductions were done, the Baron sniffed at me. "You are the Lady of the Ancients," he said.

"She is," Growltiger confirmed: "She is the Lady of the Kindly Ones I have spoken of, come in defense of her home and in honor of the Pact."

I figured it was about time I turned back into human shape. The cats and dogs all stared at me for a moment, then the Baron approached me and put his head under my hand. Although I know I couldn't understand them in human form, I thought I could still just barely hear a faint whisper of thought from the Baron: "The Pact Lives while one remembers it; the Pact Lives."

"And that, Your Majesty, is about when you and Benedict and the Guards came in. I told King Growltiger and Baron Sharptooth that I'd better start explaining things, and I think they understood my meaning if not my words. And so, here I am."

18 Years In Amber

A Reflection in the Jewel of Judgment

By Carol Dodd

Good morning,

"A lot of time has passed since these events went down..." — Bronwyn

When Erick Wujcik called me a couple of months ago and told me that he was publishing one last edition of *Amberzine* he told me that he wanted a 'great big chunk' of Bronwyn's Tale to end the magazine as it started. I was a bit skeptical, first, because I had nothing but hardcopy versions myself, and secondly because the accumulated work was so long. But he had the files and sent them to me on CD for editing.

It is long. It is very long. Even the two chapters and a small auxiliary piece that I thought I could get together before Erick left for China were much too long to be published in a magazine intended to showcase the talents and creativity of the *entire* Amber DRPG community. (And these talents are myriad.) Pierre-Alexandre emailed me with the news. I wasn't surprised.

If it were a novel, I might have cut it down. But it is *not* a novel... It's a game log. And when writing a game log, if you are to do justice to the contributions of everyone in the game, you just can't skip the bits that don't pertain to you. People give me credit for Bronwyn's Tale, but if it's a good story, that's because I had the honor of interacting with some of the best roleplayers in the world, who shaped the plot, pushed the RP envelope and handed Bronwyn the straight lines. I can't cut the story without cutting them and I'm just not going to do that.

What we finally decided to do was to publish the smaller piece, a philosophical essay that Bronwyn works out during a session in which a lot of other things were going on that were chronicled in the tale. Pierre-

Alexandre has asked me to write an introduction, and this is it.

At the time of this reasoning, Bronwyn is working out her own theories of Pattern and Power. She is sitting in a grassy knoll with some of her cousins, namely, Godfrey, Kayan, Demarian and Eleanor. Harlan is with us and not with us, because he has entered into some kind of mental/physical communication with a tree. This tree is not the fabled Ygg, but it marks this place as the door to another primal plane

Bronwyn has just discovered that besides her abilities to wield both the power of the Pattern and the power of the Abyss, she is also somehow linked to this place and is able to translate the power of this plane into an expression of herself...and just as the Abyss body she wears is different from the Pattern form she also may assume, on this plane there is yet another Bronwyn, a small rusty gold dragon who calls herself Skye.

Harlan has let Godfrey know that here on this plane is a brand new Jewel of Judgment, and he has gone to get it. He's going to bring it back and draw a new...Pattern? Bronwyn is sitting here, thinking, while her cousins discuss the matter, trying to decide what kind of new world they want to build. And that's the scene.

For those of you who have been kind enough to ask, it is unlikely that there will ever be any more of Bronwyn's Tale published. I have about five more chapters stored up, including the less than happy ending, but life and times have changed for all of us and some stories just never 'end' to everyone's satisfaction.

As for Bronwyn herself? Oh, she's still around. I like to think she's off somewhere, and certainly up to something. But for those who need an epitaph, I'll offer you one last scene from the last playing session of the game I played.

It is late at night in a library room in Castle Amber. A fire gutters in the hearth and Bronwyn, Jayson and Kelcey sit talking, with Eleanor curled up and asleep on the sofa nearby.

"Don't you *see* it?" Kelcey said to me, glancing at Jayson for support. "It's just a game. They're playing with us. That's all they've ever done. We've got to get out of here!"

Now, ever since I have known her, Kelcey has been trying to leave. 'What else is new?' I thought, but nodded because recent events had certainly

given her a good reason to feel that we'd never been anything but pawns on our parents' board. Still, if she'd ever thought differently, I hadn't known her then.

Jayson reached over and took her hand.

"I'm going to do it," she insisted, giving Jayson's hand a squeeze before she shrugged it away. "I'm getting out of here and Jayson's coming with me. I think you and Eleanor should come too. But we've got to find a place where they can't influence us, can't change things. They're destroying this place and they don't care what happens to us."

I nodded again, absently, knowing there was such a place.

"Go to Harlan," I advised, "*His* place is safe from them. He can keep them out. Believe me, he'll keep out anyone he doesn't think will fit."

And I glanced at Eleanor, fast asleep and gestured quietly in her direction.

"Take her with you, please," I mouthed.

Kelcey stared at me.

"Do you mean you're not coming?" she asked, incredulously, "Bronwyn, you've got to get out too!"

"I can't," I told her sadly, "and you know why."

I turned away, not comfortable with the sudden pity in her eyes.

"And besides," I told her quietly, "I was *born* to the game. Just like they were. Harlan was right about that."

I let that hang for a moment before adding:

"And it is all I ever wanted."

*****

With love and deep gratitude to all the players in the game, and to Erick Wujcik and the late, great Roger Zelazny.

Thank you,

Carol Dodd

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Meditations on the Power Equation

By Bronwyn

(as channeled through Carol Dodd)

I lie here in the grass, eyes closed, with the sun dappling my face through the leaves of the great tree. This is a primal place, a place of great creative interlock. The Power flows thickly about my fingertips and in my mind. Even in this body, I can sense it, if I lie still enough and tune the others out.

Its raw energy touches me directly. Me, I, My Self, independent of the body that I wear. For the first time, I see the scope of the relationship between us; between the Power and My Self.

Around me, my cousins discuss the matter. They've been at it for hours now, given that time is actually a function of this place. I realize now, that I must not make the mistake of assuming that the physical functions of other places are in operation here. They do not need to be.

Sometimes, my cousins' voices speak in low, reflective tones and they are sometimes raised in the harsh, insistent definition of some point or another about which they have very strong feelings. In almost every case, they are trying to decide what they intend to create here, what form It is to take. They argue about what they want to include, and whom and why. And, possibly, more telling: what they want to *exclude*.

While they do not wish to make the same mistakes that others made before them, it is impossible for any of them to see this creation with any other perspective except that which they already know. So everything,

determined and impassioned, good or ill, is defined in terms of the Pattern of Amber. Every hope and desire is based on how it is to be like the Pattern, or how it is to be different. Pattern is their sole point of reference, and they cannot but help define this pattern in terms of the other.

I mean, *why* a pattern at all?

We are here on a primal Plane. Within the tree that he has conceptualized and drawn as it 'should be' (and Harlan is *on to something* here, but more on this later), he has gone to get us a new Jewel of Judgment. This would *seem* to indicate that we are meant to draw a new pattern in this place. Or, at least, to believe that we are meant to do this...

Why a pattern?

Why not a Primal snowflake, or a Primal daisy chain? How about a Primal pool of ooze?

Perhaps, these things, too, are patterns.

Perhaps the Logrus is a pattern of sorts, in the broadest sense of the word, for all that it is infinitely mutable.

What is a pattern?

A pattern is a *process* by which the Power is defined along certain parameters, so that a certain population can establish a relationship with the Power for its use. The population uses the process for creation and the Multiverse continues to unfold.

But the problem occurs, I believe, when we begin to look at the process or pattern as the 'thing.' It is not the cause. It is the effect. The process is a product of the *relationship* between the Power and the Self. Or if you like, between the Power and the population.

The Self invokes the process, thereby invoking the Power. The process just makes it easier. It gives the Self a blueprint for operation.

But it is not the center of the Multiverse. It is not the 'thing.'

And so it is with Pattern.

For well over a millennium, we saw the Pattern as being exactly that. It was the 'thing' upon which all other things, events and our Selves depended for existence. It defined our culture and our customs and our language:

'All roads lead to Amber,' and, 'Amber is the one true world.'

We forgot to ask 'What is this Pattern made of?', as if it had existed

for all time, although we knew that to be untrue. We knew it was made and we knew who made it. Therefore there had to be some greater process, some greater relationship afoot, to have established such a handy little Pattern.

Things that are made are assembled from parts, or defined out of some larger block of substance in the same manner in which a sculptor carves a statue from a block of stone. Before a thing is made, there must be some relationship between its raw component and the maker. That relationship, in one of its most basic examples, *made* the Pattern. Again, Pattern was the effect, not the cause.

But we saw, or were taught to see, the Pattern as something that was apart from, and greater than ourSelves. In that, in spite of our relationship to it, we were diminished, we were alienated, we assumed a lesser, secondary role to the process.

And *this* was error.

We had defined ourSelves in terms of our process.

What do I mean when I say, I, me, mySelf?

The Self can be termed 'consciousness,' sentience or awareness. Most people tend to think of themSelves as tiny points of consciousness about which are hung great bags of flesh called bodies. We ask: 'Who would I be, if my father had been someone other than who he is?' As if we were 'made' or assembled from parts produced by our parents.

But the Self is not assembled from parts, or carved out of existing matter. Instead, like a flower grown from seed, we enlarge from within, becoming more and more complicated an entity as we unfold. We are not made from the Multiverse; we grow out of it. And we grow out of it as a natural expression of its need to have Selves to complement the Power.

All synergy, all creation is a function of the relationship between the Power and the Self.

So we have Power and we have Self, and how are we going to figure out how they relate?

In the overall, we don't really have to do this. Since we exist in complement, each to the other, we form a complete unit, or what I am calling the Power Equation. Neither the Self nor the Power is going to accomplish much creation without the complementing other half. And we don't really

need the Patterns or processes to do so. But it makes the Power more tangible, easier to touch, so we keep making them. Sometimes, this is because we wish to share the Power with other Selves, all of whom are supposedly creating toward the same effects...

So there is only one Power, but when defined along certain parameters, we can say that it is playing the 'Pattern Game,' or the Abyssal Game or the Logrus Game or whatever. In relation to this, the Self must learn to play the 'Bronwyn Game,' or the Bronwyn-Abyss Game, or the Skye Game or whatever.

But mySelf cannot truly be defined as the small, red-haired woman who is lying here in the grass under a tree. In order to truly understand mySelf, I must define mySelf as exactly one-half of the Power Equation. And right now, the Power and the Self are playing Pattern and Bronwyn.

I am. Power is. *We are.*

And we don't even need any more excuse for *being* than that.

We *are*, very simply, *how things work*.

So how are we going to work things here?

What game will we be playing?

How can the Equation be defined?

What we are *not* going to do, is define the Power process here in terms of any other process.

Godfrey says he is attuned to a 'pattern' in the Jewel that Harlan is getting. Maybe so. But maybe not.

Godfrey, after all, has only the Pattern of Amber in which to define the terms of what he saw in the Jewel, and is constrained by the language of that Pattern, for his description.

It was one of the worst mistakes that I made while I was trying to play the Bronwyn-Abyssal game. I kept trying to force the process that was the Abyss into the same mold as the process that was Pattern. (Here, I would like to plead inexperience as my excuse; in truth, I am pounding my forehead with the heel of my hand and mentally saying: 'Dumb, Dumb, *Dumb*!')

But it was a different game, the relationship between the Power and the Self, playing Abyss...

So, I would like to use a different term for what Godfrey is attuned

to in that Jewel. I would like to say he is attuned to a process.

All processes are alike in the extent that they are definitions of Power, and so they have a certain creative force that is common to all. But how a Lord of Chaos uses the process of Logrus to create, is very different than how an Amberite does it. Let's take an example.

Since the process of Logrus is based on the premise that creation represents an on-going state of flux or change, the Lords of Chaos do not seem to be able to walk in Shadow as an Amberite can do. They cannot fix their minds on a certain point and go to it, since, by the time they get there, it will not be the place that they initially perceived. It just keeps changing. In order to create, they must keep playing their game, and that game is change.

In response to this difficulty, Dworkin defined the process of Pattern to stabilize creation along the lines of order. The closer one gets to Pattern, the more ordered things become. And our relationship with the process of Pattern means that we can hold the image of a Shadow in our minds and 'order' it, as we move toward it. We are playing the Pattern game and holding that Shadow still until we get to it.

This is one of the reasons that the Chaosians could not invade Amber until the black road was opened. And for that to happen, someone playing the Pattern game had to cooperate. One might picture generations of Chaos Lords setting out for Amber and winding up somewhere else...because the Logrus game changes everything. That's how its process works. Since infinite mutability cannot conceive of an instance where this is not the case, Chaosians were incapable of moving to a place where nothing changed, until a portion of the Pattern was destabilized. And it took a 'Self' to do that. Which goes to show that the relationship is not completely dependent on any one process. It is possible for the Self to affect any process in some way that can alter the parameters.

And the corollary to this is, that in creating a process, the Self must take care not to impose the rules of another game upon it.

What does this mean?

In the Jewel of Judgment of which the Pattern of Amber is a part, there exists a dimensional Pattern. How it differs from the dimensional process that Godfrey has seen in our Jewel is immaterial at this point. The important thing to remember is that the Pattern inscribed upon the Primal

plane of Amber is just *one planar slice* of this dimensional image.

Suppose we picture the dimensional Pattern in the Jewel as a ball, and our Pattern is one thin slice of that ball, at any given point in the whole. Make the slice even a minuscule fraction of a millisecond above or below where it is, and the Pattern is slightly different. Change the angle of the slice on the ball, and the difference is even greater. And there is an *infinite* number of points on the ball where the slice could be taken. So there is an infinite number of planar Patterns within the Jewel.

The fact that Dworkin took one slice for the Pattern of Amber does not negate the existence of all the other potential slices. Somewhere on some plane, each infinite slice exists. I have seen these slices (or as many of them as my mental sense could perceive) and they are Pattern. The ones close to our own vary only in small details, and the ones that represent other slices at very different planar angles are extremely varied. However, it is possible to see, very clearly, that they are all part of the same dimensional image.

In this, they are all the work of one artistic hand. Dworkin, in deciding what slice was going to be our Pattern, likewise decided that every other possible slice was *not*. And by doing so, he defined them as clearly as he defined our own. Because you cannot describe anything, except in terms of the background in which it exists. You can't describe yourself walking, unless you also describe or at least imply that there is a surface upon which you can walk. If you try, you won't be describing the walk, only the feet moving against nothing, and that *isn't* walking. In this case, the background was the rest of the dimensional Pattern in the Jewel, and every other possible slice had to be considered and discarded. In the process, they were defined.

Corwin's pattern is an anomaly. His conceptual incompetence and procedural errors in defining what he thought was a slice of the Jewel of Judgment have rendered it so alien that in the Jewel, it appears to be a flaw... (I have seen his notes and I know that he has perceived this flaw in the Jewel, himself.) When I first saw it, it seemed so terribly antagonistic to our own, that my first reaction was that it should be destroyed. I have since changed my mind about this and I now believe that its basic error will serve to destroy it without any action on our part. Like a mutant, it is too anomalous to exist for long.

But the important thought inherent to this concept of the process of Pattern is that those infinite slices that are not our own represent every possible permutation of what a Pattern is. There is no *Pattern*, that we can create here, that will not be a duplicate of some slice that already exists in the infinitude. If we attempt to create a Pattern, instead of a process, we are creating something that is so like Pattern that the two must, by nature, have a repellent effect on each other...like two like ends of a loadstone...or be mutually exclusive to one another and thereby cancel each other out.

So what we need to create here is another process, and we must be careful not to define it in terms of Pattern. If we fall into that trap, our Selves are basing our perceptions according to a *process* that has already been defined elsewhere, and is therefore not the proper process for this reality.

We cannot decide, from another process's point of view, what belongs here in this place. We cannot decide it in terms of what we would like, or dislike to see, as a population of Selves who are playing the Pattern game. Because the Pattern game doesn't belong here.

The others *see* this, which is why they have warned me about bringing up the Pattern, which calls the Unicorn, who doesn't belong here. But they don't perceive it, on an emotional level, because they do not truly understand the Power Equation. They are still talking about a Pattern...

We have to define this game in terms of what is basic to this reality. And no other.

Which is why I believe that Harlan was on the right track, in drawing the Trump of the Tree, not as it is, but as how it *should be*. We've seen Benedict's influence all over this place, and he too, is locked in the process of Pattern. His definitions of this place are based on these perceptions, so our outward view is clouded by them. The tree probably looks to us as he perceived it, like Ygg, who is a function of the Pattern game.

But while playing the Skye game, I saw a place where I knew that a tree should be. I believe the tree that belongs there is the one that Harlan has defined.

Harlan is not Patterned. His perceptions are not colored by any preconceived ideas, and so he is able to 'see' an open-ended definition for this place that is not based on Pattern.

Likewise, whatever my part in this creative process, it cannot be

achieved while playing the Bronwyn-Pattern game. To make any meaningful contribution, I must accept the overall Power Equation, and the realization that it is the Skye game that complements the Power in this place. Bronwyn does not belong here. Skye does.

Skye *should be* in complement to the process we define.

And somehow, I must try to convince the others to divorce themselves from this process. Unless, of course, I can find a way to suspend their dependence upon the Pattern game. But I am not sure that I can convince them, because it is the only process that they know, and it is how they define themSelves in relation to the process of Power...the Pattern...

I believe we have a good chance of success, if Harlan sticks to his instincts and does not permit himSelf or his concept to be swayed by those playing the Pattern game. I hope to encourage him to rely on his artistic sense and choose the slice of this dimensional process in the new Jewel as he perceives it *should be*, just as he has done with the tree. Or maybe, he's already figured this out for himSelf. He seems to have made the connection with the basic Power Equation. I must hope that this is so.

And I shall once again define mySelf in terms of Skye, and this time, without question or fear to the consequences of whatever actions Skye may effect. It does not matter.

In spite of whatever form or body I may wear, I will always be mySelf. Exactly one-half of the Power Equation.

It is what I have always been, and what I will always be.

It is what I am.

Carol Dodd:

I'm Carol Dodd and I live in New Jersey. In 1986 I went to GenCon and I was wandering around the dealers' room, out of spending money and looking for something to do, when I stumbled on the Palladium booth where I noticed a small sign that said "Anyone interested in playing a game based on Roger Zelazny's Amber series, sign up here." I signed up there.

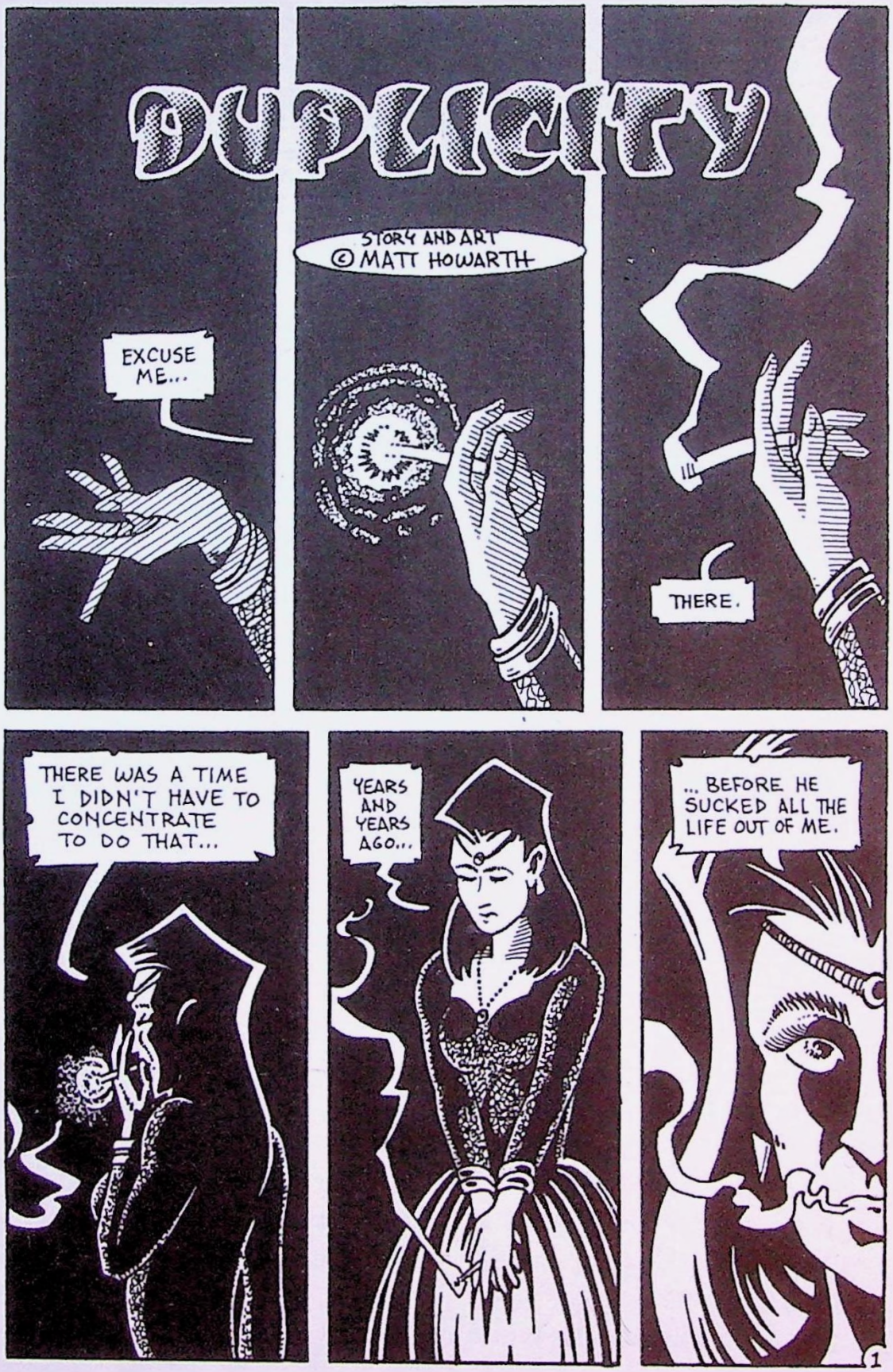
That was the weekend I created Bronwyn. I was entranced by the character, the game and yes, Erick Wujcik's strange charisma. (Rasputin with a sense of humor and a hat.) I kept going back. In 1989 I began running my first Amber campaign. I GMed... oh, about 30 hours a week (at peak) until 1995.

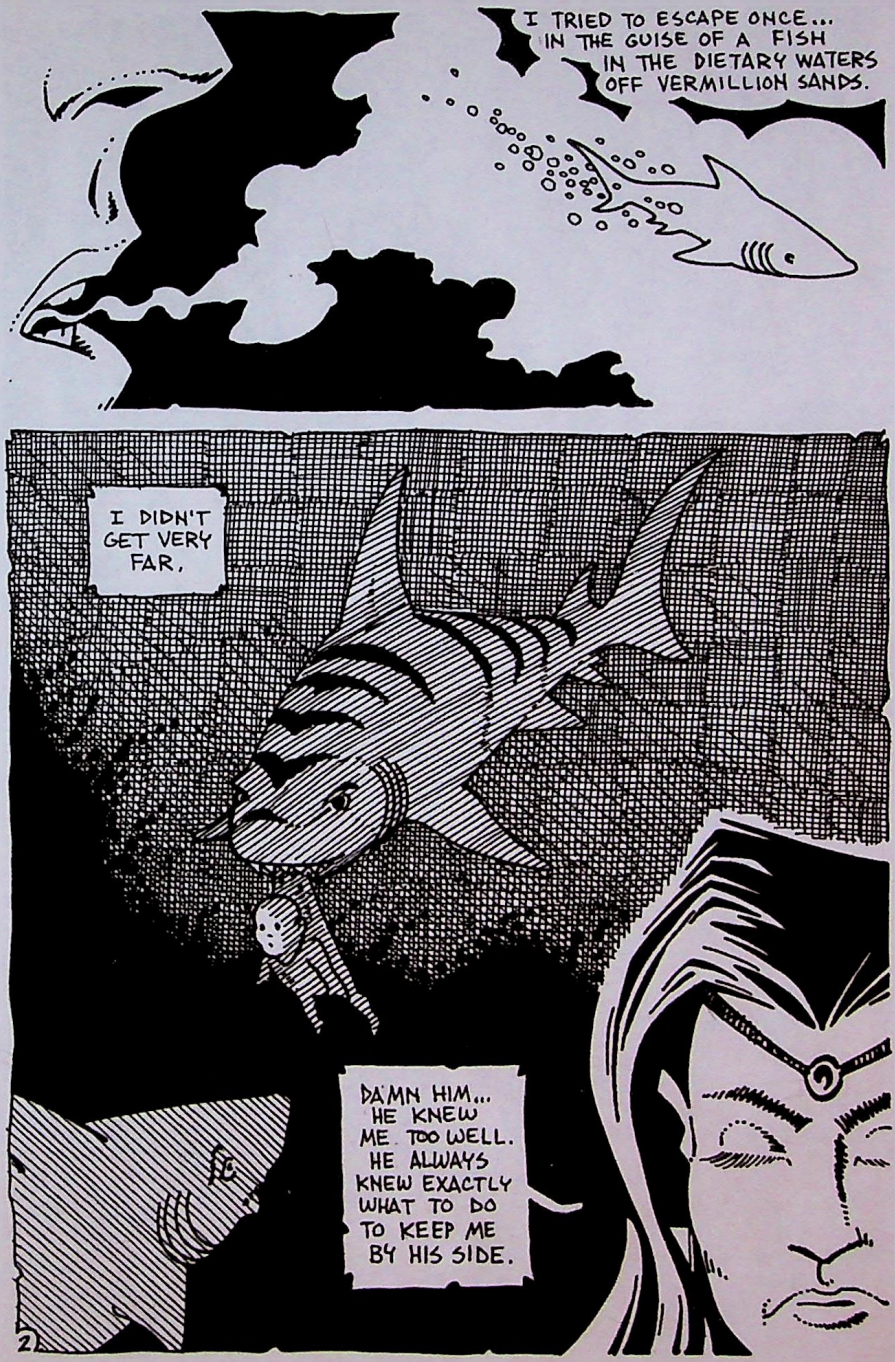
Made a lot of wonderful friends through this game. I love you, gang!

David Lihard:

David Lihard was born in 1974 in Montpellier, France. Having discovered roleplaying games at 17, he's been playing Amber DRPG since its publication in French in 1994. A painter and an illustrator, he contributes to the website "Marcheurs d'Ombre" (Shadow Walkers) on http://marcheombre.free.fr

He admits a weakness for Greek sandwiches and Turkish baths.


DUPLICITY
STORY AND ART
© MATT HOWARTH
EXCUSE ME...
THERE.
THERE WAS A TIME I DIDN'T HAVE TO CONCENTRATE TO DO THAT...
YEARS AND YEARS AGO...
... BEFORE HE SUCKED ALL THE LIFE OUT OF ME.
1

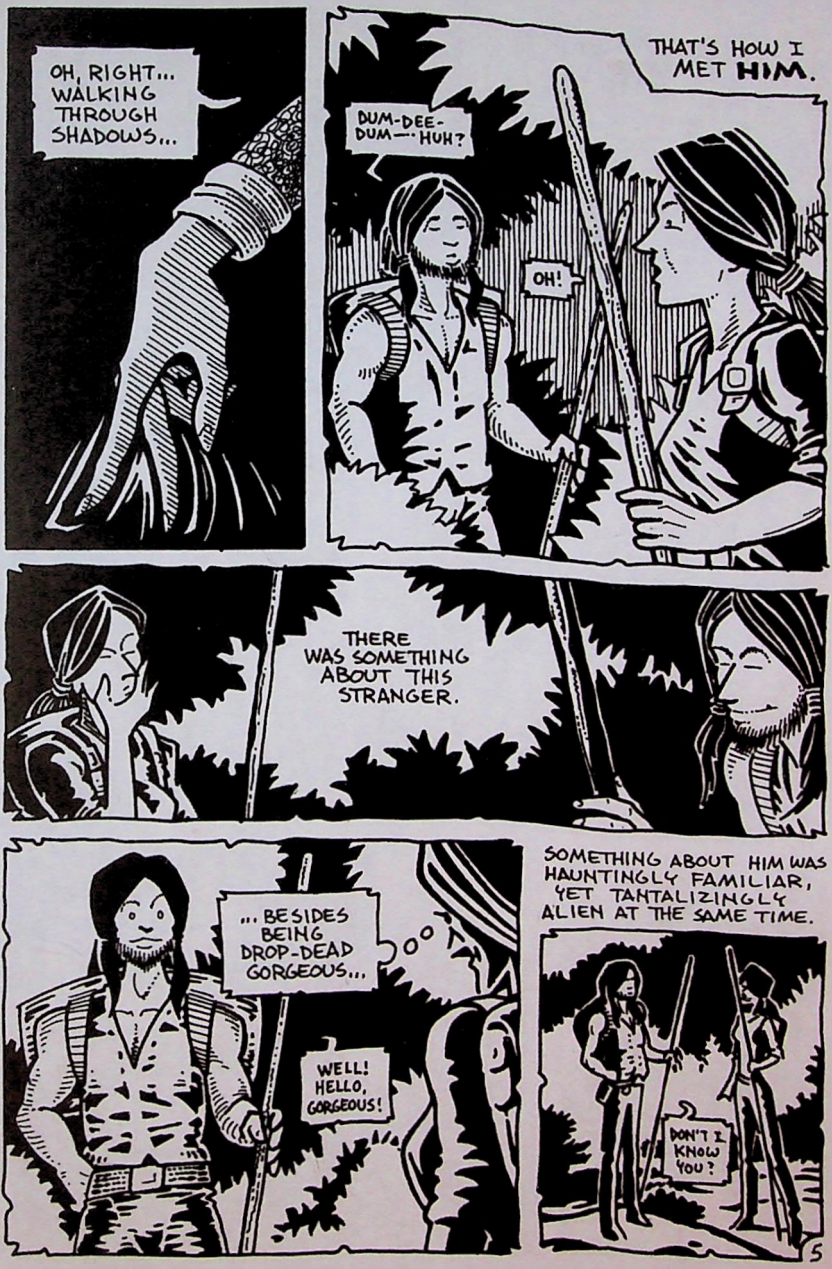

I TRIED TO ESCAPE ONCE... IN THE GUISE OF A FISH IN THE DIETARY WATERS OFF VERMILLION SANDS.
I DIDN'T GET VERY FAR.
DA'MN HIM... HE KNEW ME TOO WELL. HE ALWAYS KNEW EXACTLY WHAT TO DO TO KEEP ME BY HIS SIDE.

I USED TO ENJOY TRAVELING SO MUCH.
I'VE WALKED IN SHADOWS RICH WITH SPLENDID VARIATIONS.
I'VE CLIMBED THE UPSTART MOUNTAIN IN DAKOTAHOMA AND GAZED UPON THE CLOUD TREE.
HA
HO
3

I'VE DANCED WITH MEN WHO WORE PAPER BAG HATS IN THE FESTIVAL OF GLOBULAR GIDDINESS IN SADDLEHOLE JUNCTION.

I'VE RACED SKY-ANGLES ON THE TREACHEROUS WINDS OF A NEAR-GREEN CYCLONE.

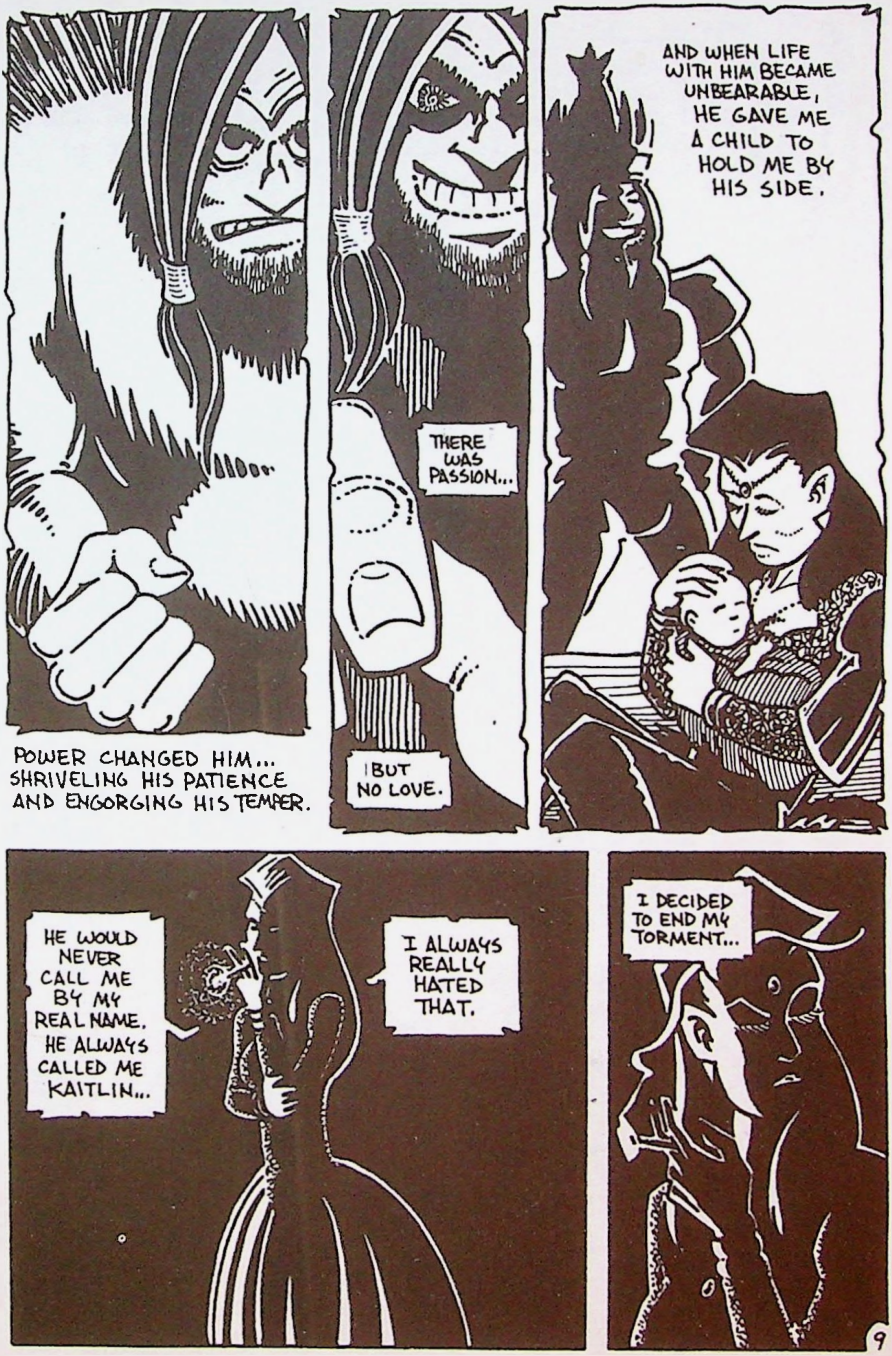
I USED TO BE QUITE A PLAYER.
HMM...
YES
I'M SORRY...THOSE DAYS HOLD SO MANY GOOD MEMORIES ...I GET LOST IN THEM SO EASILY...
WHERE WAS I...?
4


OH, RIGHT... WALKING THROUGH SHADOWS...
DUM-DEE-DUM— HUH?
OH!
THAT'S HOW I MET HIM.
THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT THIS STRANGER.
... BESIDES BEING DROP-DEAD GORGEOUS...
WELL! HELLO, GORGEOUS!
SOMETHING ABOUT HIM WAS HAUNTINGLY FAMILIAR, YET TANTALIZINGLY ALIEN AT THE SAME TIME.
DON'T I KNOW YOU?
5

WE FLIRTED—THE WAY STRANGERS DO WHEN THEY MEET ON A FOREST PATH IN SUCH A VERDANT AND ROMANTIC SHADOW.
AND I SUDDENLY REALIZED— HE WAS THIS PLACE'S SHADOW OF ME!
?
!
NARCISSISM ASIDE, I FOUND THE NOTION OF A MALE ME POWERFULLY INTRIGUING.
6

WE WERE PERFECTLY IN TUNE WITH EACH OTHER ... WE WERE TWO VERSIONS OF THE SAME PERSON. THE LOVEMAKING WAS INCREDIBLE!
I THOUGHT I HAD FOUND THE PERFECT MAN.
...MATE IN TWO, DARLING.
I NEVER EXPECTED HIM TO OUTWIT ME...
7

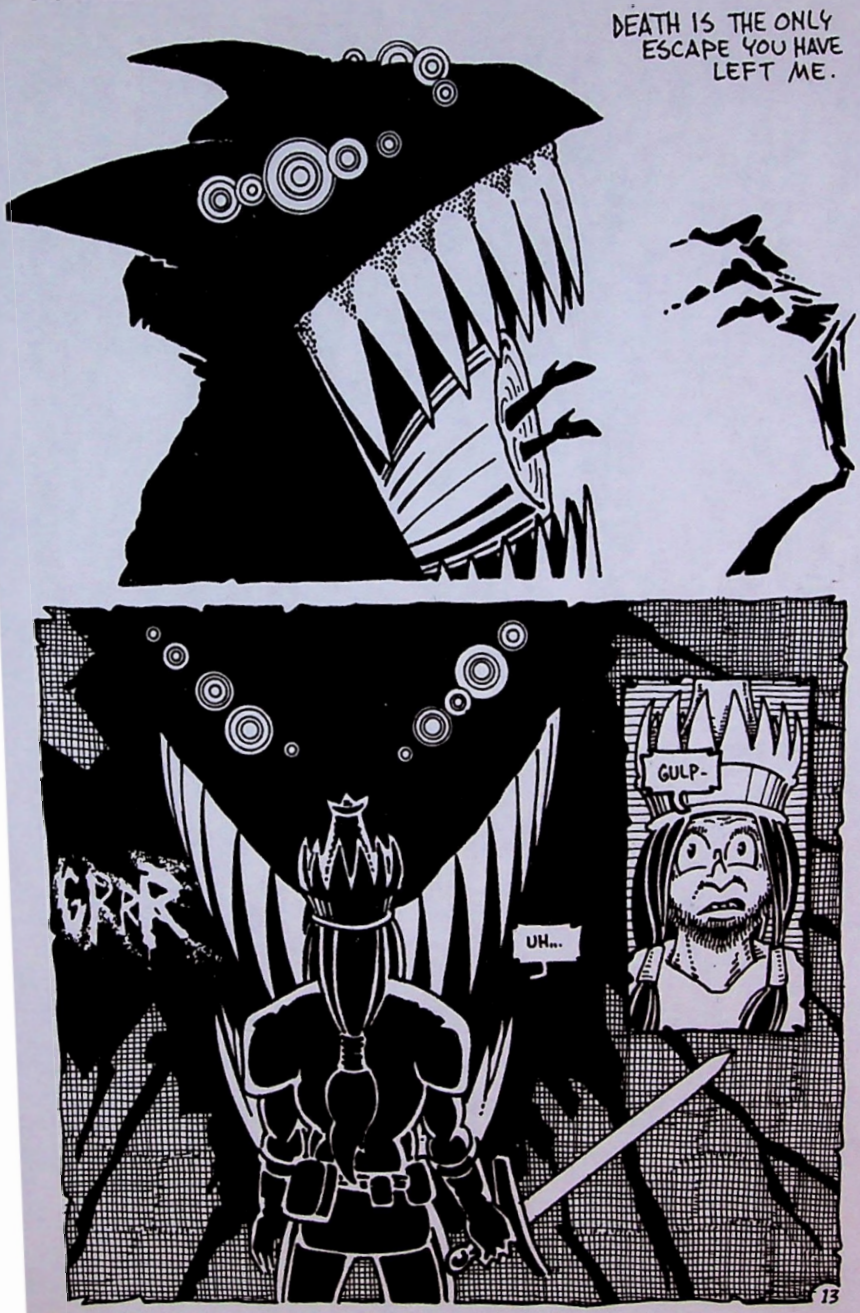
IMAGINE MY SURPRISE WHEN HE COAXED ME INTO MAKING HIM SUPREME RULER OF HIS WORLD. THAT WAS A BIG MISTAKE.
APPLAUD
CHEER
APPLAUD
APPLAUD
CHEER
HOOT
APPLAUD
CHEER
HOOT
LOVE MAKES YOU MAKE MISTAKES.
8

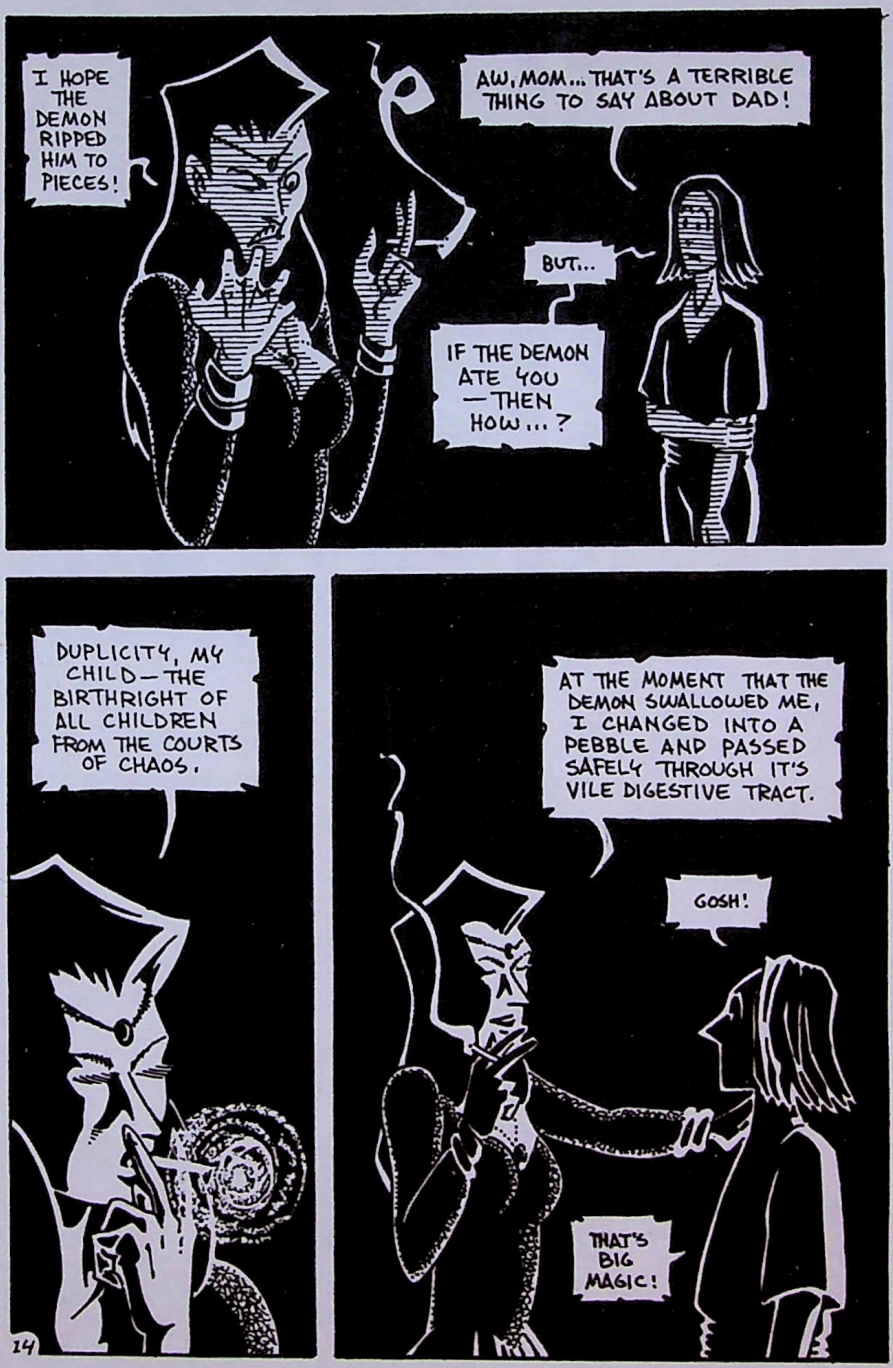

POWER CHANGED HIM... SHRIVELING HIS PATIENCE AND ENGORGING HIS TEMPER.
THERE WAS PASSION...
BUT NO LOVE.
AND WHEN LIFE WITH HIM BECAME UNBEARABLE, HE GAVE ME A CHILD TO HOLD ME BY HIS SIDE.
HE WOULD NEVER CALL ME BY MY REAL NAME. HE ALWAYS CALLED ME KAITLIN...
I ALWAYS REALLY HATED THAT.
I DECIDED TO END MY TORMENT...
9

I WANTED IT TO BE A SURPRISE...
...BUT HE STUMBLED UPON ME IN ONE OF HIS CASUAL RAGES...
GRIPE
GRR
THAT DAMNED COUNCIL AND THEIR DAMNED ALTRUISTIC WHINING—
GRUMBLE
WOMAN! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
HEY!
10

I OPENED A PORTAL...
...THAT POURED FORTH THE MOST VISCOUS OF TAINTED OILS INTO THE KING'S CHAMBERS...
...TO RISE UP AS AN AVENGING DEMON!
SURPRISE, DARLING.
11

WHAT'S THIS?! YOU WON'T BE RID OF ME AS EASY AS THIS, GIRL!
OH, THE MALE EGO...
I CALLED THE DEMON TO TAKE ME!
HUH?
BUT... I'M THE KING...
17


DEATH IS THE ONLY ESCAPE YOU HAVE LEFT ME.
GRRR
UH...
GULP-
13


I HOPE THE DEMON RIPPED HIM TO PIECES!
AW, MOM... THAT'S A TERRIBLE THING TO SAY ABOUT DAD!
BUT...
IF THE DEMON ATE YOU —THEN HOW...?
DUPLICITY, MY CHILD—THE BIRTHRIGHT OF ALL CHILDREN FROM THE COURTS OF CHAOS.
14
AT THE MOMENT THAT THE DEMON SWALLOWED ME, I CHANGED INTO A PEBBLE AND PASSED SAFELY THROUGH IT'S VILE DIGESTIVE TRACT.
GOSH!
THAT'S BIG MAGIC!

ENOUGH TO DRAIN MY CHAOS GEM... YES... BUT IT WAS WORTH IT.
YOUR POWER GEM? IS IT BROKEN?
NO, MY CHILD. I AM THE ONE WHO IS DRAINED. THE GEM IS ONLY A FOCAL POINT FOR THE POWER.
YOUR FATHER ALWAYS COVETED THAT GEM.
DID HE DIE PAINFULLY?
ACTUALLY, HE DIDN'T DIE AT ALL.
15

HE RAN AWAY AND LET THE PALACE GUARD SLAY THE DEMON YOU LEFT BEHIND. HE ALWAYS WAS CLEVER, WASN'T HE, KAITLIN?
-MY CHILD-
-MY HUSBAND-
CLEVER ENOUGH TO DISGUISE MYSELF AS THE CHILD—I KNEW YOU'D COME BACK FOR THE CHILD.
DUPLICITY RUNS DEEPER THAN ANY BLOODLINE, MY DARLING. ANYTHING YOU CAN DO, I CAN DO BETTER!
DIE!
-MY SELF-
16

FINI

An Interview with John Betancourt

We were lucky to be given the opportunity to interview John Betancourt, author of a series of prequels to the original Amber novels. ***Very*** *lucky because, due to repeated attacks notably on message boards, the author has lost some of his former eagerness to communicate with the Amber community. The first reproach he received was that it was Zelazny's own wish that nobody but himself should write Amber stories*[1] *— a fact confirmed by Neil Gaiman in his online journal*[2]*, though little did he know that he would thus kindle the fires of a holy war:*

> Well, I remember Roger talking to me and Steve Brust. We'd just suggested that if he did an anthology of other-people-write-Amber-stories that we'd be up for it (understatement) and he puffed on his pipe, and said — extremely firmly — that he didn't want anyone else to write Amber stories but him.
>
> I don't believe he ever changed his mind on that.
>
> (When Roger knew he was dying, though, he did nothing to rewrite his will, which means that his literary executor is a family member[3] from whom he was somewhat estranged — not someone who would have kept Roger's wishes paramount. Which is a pity.)
>
> Would I love to write an Amber story? God, yes. Would Steve Brust? Absolutely. Will we? Nope, because Roger told us

[1] Interestingly, he still endorsed two *A Crossroads Adventures* books penned by Neil Randall: *Seven No-Trump* and *The Black Road War*. He also granted Amberzine the special privilege to publish stories directly inspired from RPG sessions.

he explicitly didn't want it to happen.

Am I going to read the John Betancourt Amber books? Nope. (But I probably wouldn't have read them even if they were authorized, endorsed and ordered by Roger.) Do I think that they are bad or evil or something? Not really — I don't know much about them, and it's perfectly possible that his point of view is that if it's going to happen anyway it might as well be done with respect (a motivation that has, in the past, impelled me to get involved with several projects).

While Neil Gaiman states his decision to abide by Zelazny's wishes, he also refuses to judge the new prequel without further knowledge of its author's point of view. So... what was John Betancourt thinking?! His detractors have already answered, but we thought it could be interesting to also let the man speak for himself. And so begins our interview:

Pierre-Alexandre Sicart: How did you come to work on a prequel to Zelazny's Amber series?

John Betancourt: I've been involved professionally with Roger Zelazny's work in one way or another for a good 20 years now. I was working at Avon Books when the Merlin books were being written, and I got to read them in manuscript and made a few suggestions to the editor, John Douglas; I asked Roger to complete Alfred Bester's novel *Psychoshop* when I was an editor at Byron Preiss Visual Publications, and he agreed — though I've never been satisfied with the end result. I also typeset several of his books for ibooks.

When Byron Preiss, who owns ibooks, made the deal to do a new series of Amber novels, the editor to whom he assigned it asked me if I

[2] Entry of Saturday, December 29, 2001: www.neilgaiman.com/journal/2001/12/andres-accorsi-is-argentinean.asp

[3] While Zelazny had remade his life with the writer Jane Lindskold, they had never married, and as Gaiman stresses, Zelazny never rewrote his will. Consequently, the Zelazny Estate is run by Zelazny's ex-wife. Zelazny's children (Devin, Trent, Shannon) do not benefit from it.

could recommend someone to write the series. The deal was already done; it was just a matter of who would write the books at that point. I asked if I could, did a sample chapter which everyone (editor, agent, and the estate) approved, then did an outline, which they all liked. So I got the job.

It probably didn't hurt that I've read the original series half a dozen times over the years and I enjoy writing in other people's universes. I had to take a significant pay cut from what I normally get for writing shared-world novels to write this series, since I thought it would be a lot of fun. So I guess that qualifies it as a labor of love.

Michael Kucharski: If you hadn't been available, which other author would you have recommended?
J.B.: I think Terry Bisson would have done an excellent job.
M.K.: Terry Bisson is generally thought to have done a good job as a scriptwriter for the graphic novel adaptations of the first two Amber novels[4]; however, with a graphic novel, the writer is only half of a team creating a world for the reader to enter and explore. Are you familiar with the adaptations, and do you have any opinion on Lou Harrison's visual interpretation or that of Christopher Schenck who drew the second adaptation?
J.B.: Unfortunately, I missed them. I've never been much of a comic book or graphic novel fan. My interests have always been the written word first and foremost.

P.-A.: Talking about love . . . or its evil twin . . . Since the Amber prequel was announced, several message boards have become battlefields, with you as the target of flame wars. What was your reaction?
J.B.: I read through those message boards, and was quite amused to see me labeled as a hack gaming writer. I've written exactly one game-related

[4] Terry Bisson, whose short story "Bears Discover Fire" won several awards, among which the Hugo and the Nebula, is also known for his adaptation of *Nine Princes in Amber* and *The Guns of Avalon* for DC Comics (1996). On his website, you can read a brief "Appreciation of Roger Zelazny": www.terrybisson.com/zelazny.html

novel — out of 36 books! When my editor at Warner Books took a job at TSR. He asked me to do a fantasy novel set in their Birthright universe, and told me I could write pretty much anything I wanted as long as it kind of matched up with the world's setting.

My original novels have never sold as well as media tie-ins like my four Star Trek novels, so I guess it's easy to ignore the fairly large body of original fiction I've published over the years . . . more than 100 short stories, a bunch of novels like *Johnny Zed, Rememory, The Blind Archer, The Dragon Sorcerer, Born of Elven Blood*, etc. I can see how my trilogy of books about Hercules might get confused with the TV show, which appeared at about the same time, but they're actually original novels about the mythic hero, with nothing to do with Kevin Sorbo.

I'm not saying my Amber novels are perfect or great literature or on par with Zelazny's. I'm not Roger Zelazny, and I'm not trying to be. What I'm trying to do is tell a good story with interesting characters that people will enjoy. I think that should be every writer's goal. If people decide it's great literature, great. If people enjoy it as escapist reading, great. If not, well, there are lots of other books available. Pick something else.

P.-A.: But what about your detractors' main grief: that is, that Zelazny didn't want anyone but himself to write Amber stories?

J.B.: My take on it is that he didn't want anyone else writing it because he wasn't done with it. I read somewhere that he was planning a third series. Clearly he had more to add, new twists, another generation of heroes to explore. That's how I feel about my own fantasy world of Zelloque, where many of my original fantasy novels and stories are set. I don't want anyone else writing in it now because I'm not done yet. I have more stories to tell, more characters to explore. After I'm dead and gone, it won't matter: what matters is my body of work, and if licensing new works keeps my own work in print and being read (much as the Conan franchise has kept Robert E. Howard's original works alive and well) — so much the better. Without new works to maintain interest in his literary oeuvre, Zelazny will be out of print and forgotten within 10 years, with only the occasional short story showing up in reprint anthologies and the once-in-a-while reprint of a book in a line of classic reprints.

M.K.: Why should Zelazny be so soon forgotten when popular writers such as Dumas, Verne, Wells or Doyle and are kept in print?
J.B.: Take a look at their complete bodies of work, then look at how little of it is actually still in print. (Well, until my company put many of them back into print, anyway.) Only a handful of classics from each are routinely reissued . . . and these are works by major mainstream writers, with a much broader appeal than a "mere" genre science fiction and fantasy writer such as Zelazny.

M.K.: Point conceded to you. Back when the short-lived and disappointing *Secret Adventures of Jules Verne* was being originally broadcast, I reviewed and reread my collection of both Verne and H.G. Wells. And part of what made the series so disappointing was the wealth of Verne material not being used in the show — material seemingly unknown to many of the viewers, but that personally I knew.
J.B.: I agree. I think they really flubbed what could have been an amazing show. One of the appeals of Verne is his belief in technology. Bringing the supernatural into that show particularly irked me.

M.K.: Still, how would you feel if your publisher elected (against your wishes) to have other authors write stories in your imaginary universe?
J.B.: That can't happen. It's part of the copyright laws.

There are two types of books: original fiction, which is owned and controlled by the author outright, and work-made-for-hire (WMFH), which is owned by the publisher. When an author creates a book or short story, all rights to it reside with him. He can do whatever he wants with it, and no one else can. It is his property. His publisher cannot hire another author to write books set in that universe without permission. That's why Roger Zelazny could say, "I don't want anyone else writing Amber stories" and no one could. And, when ownership of the copyrights moved out of his hands with his passing, that's why the new owner could say, "Yes, now that Roger is gone, someone else can pick up the series and continue it."

WMFH includes books based on media properties such as *Star Wars, Star Trek, Spider-Man*, and so on down the line. It includes books based on other books, such as Robert E. Howard's "Conan" and many

others. My Amber novels fall into this category. It doesn't mean they're bad or good; it's just an ownership and licensing term. I work to the best of my ability on everything I write, whether I own it or someone else does. That's simply common courtesy — not just to the copyright holder, but to readers.

M.K.: Even when a writer is in control of his own world, he seldom is of his own book. Many people judge a book by its cover, but this cover is commissioned by the editor, not the author. How pleased are you with the visual representations of your stories, notably *The Dawn of Amber*?

J.B.: I think they're all right — fairly generic, yes, but not actually harmful in any way. I've had covers so awful on some of my early novels, especially the ones from Warner, which I cringe whenever I see them. If you get a chance, take a look at the cover to my 1990 SF novel *Rememory*. The first edition has Kirstie Allie and a Cylon spaceship from Battlestar: Galactica. Now that's a nightmare!

M.K.: Inspiration/imitation manifests itself in everyone's work. It is well known that Roger's Amber can be clearly traced to Henry Kuttner's *The Dark World* (reprinted most recently in *Amberzine* #5) and Philip José Farmer's *World of Teirs* series. Although not really confirmed, some of the philosophies of Plato, Kant and Schopenhauer can also be seen in the concepts behind Amber. My question is: what wells of inspiration did you draw from to expand upon the original Amber mythos? And why?

J.B.: Mainly, of course, I drew on Zelazny's own body of work. I reread all 10 Amber novels before writing my first book, marking them up with notes about anything I found important or relevant to my own books.

My own background is vastly different from Roger Zelazny's. I'm more interested in language than philosophy — I've studied not just the usual Romance languages, but German, Greek, and Latin. I've read some of the seminal philosophical works — Nietzsche, Descartes, etc. — but I have nowhere near the depth of background that Roger had, and I'm not going to try to fake it.

My idea of a suitable companion series is one that evokes the same feelings in readers as the original evoked in me the first time I read it, a kind of breathless swept-away feeling as you're catapulted through a series of

adventures with new revelations and puzzles constantly enfolding around you. Judging from the reactions of non-gaming readers, whom I view as a more unbiased success-test for the series, I've largely succeeded. I've received more responses — 99% of it favorable — to my Amber novels than to anything else I've ever written.

M.K.: Many GMs (and players) frequently "borrow" ideas and images from other SF/Fantasy authors (for example Michael Moorcock, because of the recurring theme of Chaos versus Order in most of his books) to incorporate into their Amber storylines. This is of course very dangerous ground for a professionally published writer to tread. What have you purposefully tried to incorporate? What have you been inspired by?

J.B.: I haven't deliberately tried to incorporate anything by anyone other than Zelazny, with one exception. For my own amusement, I put a reference to one of my own novels in *The Dawn of Amber*, naming its world as one of the *Shadows of Amber*. Writers do things like that all the time . . . in-jokes, Tuckerizations. Of course, I've read so much — inside the field and out — that it's probably impossible for me to define everything I've drawn on subconsciously even if I wanted to. I have a keen interest in classic fantasy, which is one reason I've reprinted most of the early classics of the fantasy and horror field back into print over the last 4 years, from E.R. Eddison to William Morris to William Hope Hodgson. I'm sure a few elements from them have made their way into my Amber books, somewhere.

Right now, my primary reading material is by pulp writers from the first half of the 20th century, mainly adventure and mystery. I'm doing a lot of research for publications from Wildside Press, the publishing company I own. The short story I just finished last week is a mystery, and I see influences from writers like Johnston McCulley — the creator of Zorro — to Maurice LeBlanc, who created the antihero-thief Arsène Lupin, to Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes.

There are rich traditions in almost every field based on cross-pollination from other authors. Michael Moorcock — yes, I can see his influence on Zelazny. I haven't read the Kuttner story you mentioned. And there are others, of course. The fantasy field has a lot of standard elements that all writers freely incorporate, and many of them trace their way back to the Victorian and Edwardian fantasy writers — William Morris,

C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, etc.

M.K.: And what have you purposefully avoided (perhaps because of overuse or whatever reason)?

J.B.: I've tried to minimize my use of the Shadow-walk descriptions, because they are by and large poetry, which is not my forte. I've tried to put in just enough to give a flavor of the original Amber. As I said before, that's my goal . . . to recreate the feeling you get from reading the original Amber novels.

M.K.: Few writers get the opportunity to legally write stories in another author's world. Many create imitations, with just enough modifications to protect themselves from lawsuits and/or to foster the illusion of creativity. What is your opinion on this phenomenon? Where does paying homage to someone else's work stop and plagiarism begin?

J.B.: It's really not something that concerns me greatly one way or another. There will always be derivative works; it's the nature of business, from books to TV to movies to TV Dinners. Having cheap copies strengthens the original product by turning it into a brand name.

M.K. & P.-A.: Most fans of the Amber series consider the first set of five books to be superior to the second set, written seven years later. Objectively, there is a marked difference in tone, themes, and prose. Why such a difference? Had Zelazny lost touch with his own creation? Was he reluctantly answering an editorial request? Had his style simply evolved? Was he voluntarily trying to not repeat himself? Was he trying to pander to a specific readership? Was he just having fun, not caring to impress anyone? What is your opinion? How would you define the difference between the Corwin novels and the Merlin ones? What impact did it have on your own work?

J.B.: I had always heard that he wrote the second series to pay for college expenses for his son — though of course whether that's true or not, I don't know. I think the Merlin series brings more depth to the Amber universe, but it's less dramatically satisfying than the Corwin series. It may simply boil down to some books simply being better than others, and you can't always write classics.

For *The Dawn of Amber*, I must admit I took more inspiration from

the Corwin books than the Merlin books. But I drew on both series. There is so much material of interest and value in both series that you can't separate them.

P.-A.: After his Merlin series, Zelazny wrote five Amber short stories[5]. According to Erick Wujcik, he wished to write new Amber novels, this time from Fiona's or Dworkin's point of view. You chose to focus your own prequel trilogy on Oberon; but why Oberon, and why a prequel?
J.B.: I didn't have a choice. Oberon came with the book contract. Byron Preiss and Kirby McCauley, Roger's agent, had agreed that the licensed books would be prequels and about Oberon long before I became involved. It makes sense, in that any additions I make to the series won't change the basic core of the world or Roger's storyline. I'm merely fleshing out the backstory to existing works.

Would I have done things differently, given a chance to write anything I wanted in the Amber universe? I'm not sure. I would have enjoyed writing a story with Corwin as the protagonist. But the prequels make a lot of sense creatively and commercially.

M.K. & P.-A.: Aren't prequels naturally more boring than sequels, though, since the fan can tell where the story will lead? After all, we all know that Oberon will end up as Amber's king.
J.B.: I think there's plenty of story left to tell. Of course Oberon has a Destiny-with-a-capital-D, but how he gets there is the interesting part. It's the trip, not the destination.

P.-A.: Your three first Amber novels have been successful enough that two more have been commissioned. Will Oberon still be the focus of the story?
J.B.: Definitely — I originally wanted to write five volumes about Oberon, but I ended up condensing the story to three books and cutting out some of the subplots. Amber ought to be done in 5-volume sets, I think, for tradition's

[5] All those stories have appeared in Amberzine. They have since been gathered, together with sixteen other tales from Zelazny, in *Manna from Heaven*, published by Wildside Press: www.wildsidepress.com

sake.

P.-A.: Will it be a separate story, or a direct continuation to the trilogy?
J.B.: *The Dawn of Amber* is three volumes and resolves to my satisfaction; the second series, Shadows of Amber, will have two volumes (with of course a cliffhanger between them). Both will focus on Oberon consolidating his power and slowly starting to become the ruthless king we know from a thousand years later. We are seeing the events that shaped him . . . the betrayals, the political machinations, the people trying to use him. Every family member has his or her own agenda. It's just that some are better at it, or better at hiding it, than others. Oberon is a survivor-type; he just keeps getting stronger and better whatever happens to him. He's learning and growing.

There will be a certain disconnect between *The Dawn of Amber* and *Shadows of Amber*. A few years have passed. Castle Amber is nearing completion. The first Shadows book concerns the discovery of Rebma, Freda trying to marry Oberon off, and Dworkin trying to make Oberon into a puppet ruler.

P.-A.: "So I've got this amnesiac hero-to-be . . ." Zelazny started his first Amber novel without any idea of where it would lead. What about you? How did you proceed with *The Dawn of Amber*?
J.B.: Because this series had to be approved by many other people — editor, publisher, agent, estate — I wrote a detailed outline for each book, then tried to stick to it as closely as possible. I've worked on enough licensed properties to realize that people expect the book to match the outline.

The first two books are very close to the outline. Those who read *To Rule in Amber* and the outline for it that I posted at the *Shadows of Amber* web site[6] will realize I strayed a bit in that one. The changes improved the book and story.

P.-A.: In contrast, what about those novels and short stories that are entirely your own?
J.B.: It varies. Some short stories, particularly horror, I tend to write backwards — I have an idea for the ending, an image or emotional reaction

for one of the characters, and I write deliberately toward that point. Science fiction and fantasy tend to be plot driven, and I generally have at least an idea of the plot and characters. For my own original novels, I tend to work from outlines, but I stray from them constantly. I don't feel the need to follow them if the story goes elsewhere.

M.K. & P.-A.: Don't you feel that franchise work takes away from the time you could devote to your own worlds, notably Zelloque?

J.B.: Not really, I'm more of a hobbyist writer these days. I make my living as an editor and publisher for Wildside Press, and I write when I feel like it, scheduling it around my other publishing activities. I also write only what interests me. The fact that the Amber books got me motivated enough to go after the project speaks volumes as to my interest level.

I don't choose to write one story instead of another; if I hadn't written the Amber novels, I probably would have used that time for a non-writing activity, probably editing or typesetting. Or even family time or sleep!

I do have a lot of ideas for Zelloque stories, and I'll write many of them eventually. The nice thing about story ideas is that they don't disappear. I keep working on them in my head until I'm ready to sit down and write them.

M.K. & P.-A.: The success of your Star Trek novels overshadows the larger body of original fiction you have written. Overall, do you think that franchise work has helped or harmed your career? Aren't you afraid to be labeled as a "writer for hire"?

J.B.: I used to worry about it, but I don't anymore. I wrote the Star Trek novels when I needed money. They paid for my first house, and they kept Wildside Press in business when an unscrupulous distributor did us out of $35,000 about a decade ago. So I'm very grateful for them, and I'm glad to have written them, since they introduced more than half a million new readers to my work.

I've also gotten work because of them — I collaborated on a pseudonymous Superman novel because of them, for instance, which was a

[6]http://bb.bbboy.net/shadowsofamber-viewthread?forum=15&thread=30

lot of fun — so they can be a useful credential for a writer. And I can call myself a nationally bestselling author because of them, although the Amber novels have also put me on bestseller lists.

Ultimately, I think the quality of my work stands on its own. So many people have written franchise work these days that there isn't any sort of stigma attached to it from an artistic or commercial standpoint. It's simply part of a working writer's career.

M.K. & P.-A.: Notorious authors have been known to write franchise novels[7], yet it is usually a domain associated to fledging talents. Fiction or truth?

J.B.: Fiction. Franchise books used to be for beginners in the 1970s, but there is so much money at stake these days, and the editors are looking for top-quality writing and highly professional authors who write to often demanding deadlines, so newcomers are simply out of luck. You have to be an experienced professional with substantial credentials to write franchise fiction. Just take a look at who's writing *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* novels these days. It ain't newbies.

M.K. & P.-A.: As a reader, as a writer, do you enjoy franchise novels?

J.B.: Do I enjoy franchise novels? I don't read them, much, so I can't comment on them much. I've read several of Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson's "Dune" novels, and a sequel to *The Day of the Triffids* by an author whose name escapes me at the moment. Clark?

Do I enjoy writing them? Yes — if I know and like the characters. There are very few TV or movie series I'd like to write a novel based on today. I'm sure I'd enjoy writing novels based on any of the *Star Trek* series, *Stargate SG1*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or *Angel*, *Jeremiah*, or several other series I watch. Will I? Probably not. I don't need to write to pay the

[7] Phillip Jose Farmer added new stories to a number of Edgar Rice Burroughs's universes, for instance. Similarly, Lin Carter and L. Sprague de Camp expanded Robert E. Howard's short stories and story notes into "new" Conan novels, while Robert Jordan wrote eight completely new Conan novels years before authoring The Wheel of Time.

bills anymore, so I don't hustle after work the way I would have if I needed to support myself or my family from my writing. And I have two more Amber novels and three original novels under contract with ibooks, so that's going to keep me busy for some time. If I didn't have an outlet for my fiction, I might be more concerned about publishing something-high profile to keep my name before readers.

M.K. & P.-A.: You mention TV and movie series, but aren't there literary worlds, aside from Amber, you would like to visit as a writer?
J.B.: Although few literary series have enthralled me the way Amber did, there are a number I'd like to work in. I'd love to do a story set in Frank Herbert's "Dune" universe, and perhaps a tale of Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd & the Grey Mouser. Perhaps a Conan story.

M.K.: Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser are fairly unique amongst the Sword & Sorcery characters of that era: they grew old, changed and evolved. At what point in their long and colorful careers might you be interested in interjecting a new tale of theirs?
J.B.: I like the whole series, but I particularly enjoy the tales during the early part of their career. I think there's more vitality to them, more of a sense of exploration and adventure.

M.K. & P.-A.: Do you think it possible for a franchise writer to produce better stories than the original ones they are based on?
J.B.: Yes. There are some excellent writers drawn to franchise fiction, either by love of a particular series or economic necessity. I could argue — just to cite one recent example — that Sherwood Springer's books in various Andre Norton series are better than the originals. In media fiction, most of the *Star Trek: Voyager* novels are better than the TV show.

Are my Amber books better than Roger Zelazny's? I don't think so. But that won't stop me from trying!

M.K.: There is a history of sons earning a living by taking up their father's creative legacy. Thus with J.R.R. Tolkien's son Christopher or Frank Herbert's son Brian. Any thoughts on this phenomenon?

J.B.: Christopher Tolkien's work was, if I remember correctly, largely as editor on the vast quantity of literary papers left by his father. I don't think he actually wrote anything in the way of fiction, did he?

Brian Herbert is certainly the right person to be continuing the Dune series — collaborating with Kevin J. Anderson. I've read several of their Dune books and enjoyed them. They're clearly not Frank Herbert, nor are they trying to be. What they are doing is expanding on a popular universe and filling in bits and pieces of a much larger picture. Fortunately, they have all of Frank Herbert's notes, which I understand are copious.

M.K. & P.-A.: In general, what do you like to read?

J.B.: The last book I read that I didn't publish myself was *The Selected Letters of Clark Ashton Smith*. The last magazine I read was the September 2004 issue of Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine. I spoke at a writer's conference a few months ago, and they gave away back issues of various mystery magazines. I really enjoyed the *Ellery Queens* and *Alfred Hitchcocks* and am now a regular reader of both. I find it refreshing, since I hadn't read mysteries since I was a teenager.

Anyway, at the end of the writer's conference, at the banquet, I found myself sitting with Linda Landrigan, the editor of *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, and Michael Bracken, who's a mystery writer. The conference had a Murder Mystery Theatre-type show after the banquet. I was the only one at our table to solve it correctly . . . none of the mystery pros did. That was an omen for me to become a mystery writer, I said jokingly.

My prize for solving the mystery was a pair of raffle tickets for the conference's gift-basket giveaway. I tossed my tickets in. There were about 30 baskets with various themes appropriate to writing. About a week after the conference, I got an email informing me that I had won the Mystery Writer's Gift Basket, which contained all sorts of inspirational items (police badge, handcuffs, hangman's noose, bottle marked "poison," etc.) and about a dozen how-to-write-mysteries books. Another omen.

So, a month or three later, after reading the freebie mystery magazines and several subsequent issues, I decided that I had to write a mystery. I finished it a few weeks ago. Everyone who's read it has raved about it, so

perhaps I have a new career ahead as a mystery writer, too.

P.-A.: And as a game writer, maybe? You wrote a *Birthright* novel, but do you play RPGs?
J.B.: I had never heard of *Birthright* before I was asked to write a novel for it, but I found the background world fascinating, and *The Hag's Contract* is not only a book I enjoyed writing, but it's one I'm quite proud of.

I used to be a regular gamer, but I've only played once in the last eight or nine years.

P.-A.: Which games did you play? Were you GM or player?
J.B.: When we were in college, a friend of mine named Leigh Grossman wrote his own RPG, which he's been playing and refining for about 25 years. I played regularly for about 10 or 12 years when we lived close to each other. I GMed a couple of times when he was tired or burned out, but I never enjoyed GMing as much as playing a character.

Leigh's game is now in print as the Wildside Gaming System — see www.wildsidegame.com — and I wrote the first module for it, *Assignment: Thief!* It's based on my Zelloque universe and contains a single adventure scenario, plus a couple of short stories to give the GM a feel for the flavor of the world. *Assignment: Thief!* is available as a free download from the Wildside Gaming System web site, wildsidegame.com.

The last time I gamed, it was as a GM to beta test *Assignment: Thief!* This was at Worldcon[8] 2004, where the Wildside Gaming System debuted.

P.-A.: Haven't you been tempted to write an RPG (or a campaign book for the Wildside Gaming System) about Zelloque, or some other world of your own creation?
J.B.: I did that one module already, and I'll probably write more, simply because the Wildside Gaming System needs more products. As for a whole RPG — Wildside's magic system is based in large part on Zelloque already,

[8] The World Science Fiction Society's World Science Fiction Convention: http://worldcon.org

so anyone who wanted to run a Zelloque campaign already has everything he or she needs. Just read one of my books, like *Master of Dragons* or *The Blind Archer*, or any of the Zelloque short stories available from fictionwise.com, and you'll have a feel for the background. Or download the free module from wildsidegame.com — that's set in Zelloque and can easily be adapted to any gaming system.

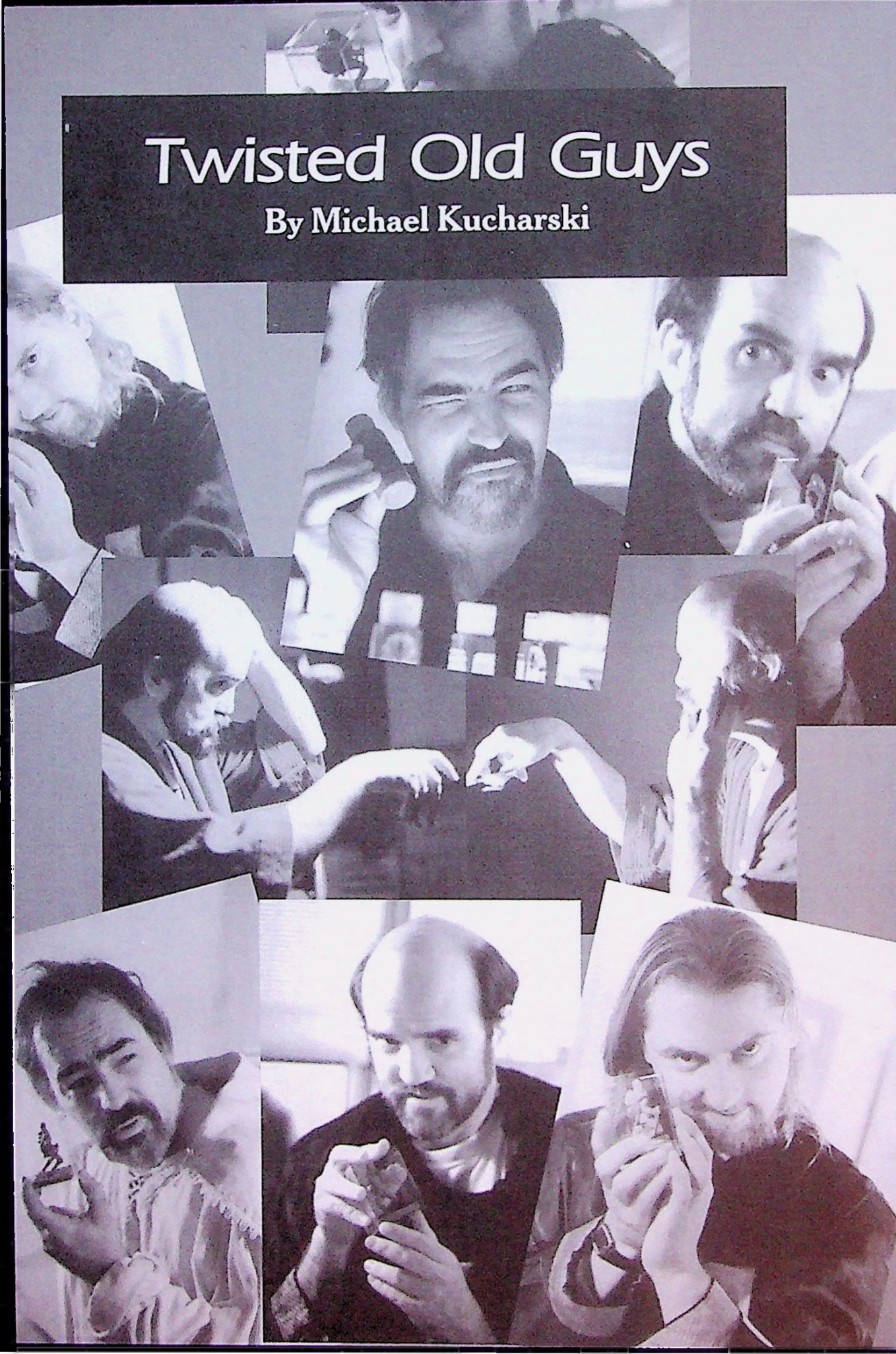
P.-A.: Has gaming had any impact on your writing — how you set a plot, how you draw characters?
J.B.: I ultimately found gaming to be creatively draining. I was putting my creativity into the gaming sessions rather than my writing. Fortunately I wasn't writing all that much when I was a regular gamer, since I had a full-time editing job at the time, but I think writing actually came more easily once I stopped.

P.-A.: Did you ever play in the Amber universe, using the ADRPG rules or others?
J.B.: I've never played it. A few friends from *Shadows of Amber* have been trying to tempt me, but so far I've managed to resist. I have two young kids, a full-time job running Wildside Press, and five novels under contract . . . I have no time!

M.K.: On behalf of *Amberzine's* readers, thank you for taking the time and effort that this interview process has demanded of you. Thank you, John.

Twisted Old Guys

By Michael Kucharski



At the 1994 ACUS[1], at Erick Wujcik's behest, Ken Alves and I did a presentation and chalk talk. So some of what follows may be old hat for some of you.

Even before illustration, the first art form I fell in love with was comic books. They were probably the first form of writing that I fell in love with as well. One of the great joys of doing comic books is that one doesn't have to settle on (or for) a single scene.

When I first got to read an advance copy of *Blue Horse, Dancing Mountain*, the first visual that captured my imagination was the opening with Corwin astride Shask... Three or four compositions were explored by the time the final illustration that introduces the story (page 30) was finished. Later, as the months turned into years waiting for the illustration to see print, other bits 'n' pieces of scenes called to be put into pen & ink (or more)... the chess match. I began by playing around with the chess game but later settled on Dworkin. Why? For a chance to re-explore the character, to create something similar to the cover of *Amberzine* #8, Dworkin TrumpMaster, and yet at the same time create something new.

Those of you who attended the 1994 ACUS will remember that I explore a number of intellectual issues regarding the conceptualization of a new illustration before drawing small geometrized thumbnails to visualize the composition. Sometimes, after selecting a thumbnail, it may then be expanded and developed farther, or I may begin to select a model (or models) and proceed with a photo shoot. Three different models, Bill Bryan, Mark Wizynajtys and myself, were used to create a body of photographs from which to create a new Dworkin illustration. By the way, Bill is the dark-haired bearded fellow, Mark is the fair-haired bearded fellow, and I'm the bald one.

Regarding photographing models, I actually prefer to be the photographer than the model; it usually insures better, more usable results, depending of course on the individual sense of body language and sense of theatrics that a model possesses. The quality and usefulness of the images of me in the role of the model depend on the person I have placed behind my camera. The benefit of using many different models is that no two people

[1] AmberCon US: www.ambercon.com

stand, move or express an action in the same way; it lends an important touch of reality to one's work. The montage of photos at the beginning of this article represents only a small portion of the 78 different photographs taken during three different photo shoots. In the case of Dworkin ChessMaster, I had a fairly strong idea of what I wanted the final illustration to look like (see illustration on right) but it never hurts to allow models to explore other possibilities; something wonderful may come of it.

Granted, I have created many illustrations without the use of models or other reference materials, but the time it takes to arrive at a drawing that I am happy with is usually much longer than the time the project allows for. But I digress...

It the case of the Mark Wizynajtys photo shoot, a number of interesting images for Dworkin other than what I had originally envisioned suggested themselves. I did a reasonably tight pencil drawing inspired by

one of those surprise images (see illustration on bottom of page 434) and it looked promising. I progressed to creating a finished pen & ink drawing (see right), but halfway to completion it became clear that, in fact, it wasn't going to work out.

So I went back to the original sketch and developed it into a full-size sketch (see illustration on top of page 436). Once again, it looked promising, so I went a step further and developed a more detailed pencil study (see illustration on the lower righthand corner of page 436)—not wanting to go to ink again only to discover once more that, finally, it wasn't going to work. But this time, it did, and the finished Dworkin ChessMaster now adorns the cover of this Amberzine.

Now, as I said back in 1994 at ACUS, I save everything and will try to recycle what didn't fit one illustration to serve another. In the past,

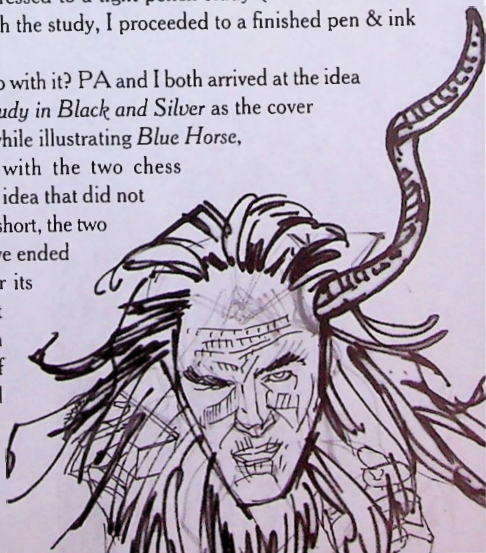
unused/rejected studies of Oberon later became Swayvill in *Shadow Knight*; rejected stances for Corwin later became both Morgan, my own character from the original playtest of the system appearing on the cover of *Amberzine* #2, and the still unpublished Morgant, one of Morgan's sons from The Wolfling campaign; the Deirdre and Florimel rejected by Erick were later transformed into the other royal ladies within the Amber saga appearing in Shadow Knight and the unpublished Rebma; as for the the rejected Dworkins, they took many shapes: one was transformed into Merlin and used in an Arthurian coloring book, while another illustrated a pseudo-fairy tale in *Pandora* Magazine and yet another was used in *Shadow Knight* to represent the sorcerer Sharu Garul, first known ruler of the Keep of Four Worlds.

So, why not do Suhuy? I had a wealth of unused fresh reference material on hand.

Although I wanted Suhuy to be the equal of Dworkin, I also

wanted him to be both Dworkin and the opposite of Dworkin. Looking through the photographs, I found a set of images of Bill Bryan that seemed to do what I wanted them to do. After doing a very rough preliminary sketch (see above illustration) I then laid a piece of tracing paper over it and doddle an indication of horns and hair (see below illustration). It seemed like it was going to work so I quickly progressed to a tight pencil study (see illustration on page 440). Happy with the study, I proceeded to a finished pen & ink drawing.

Now what to do with it? PA and I both arrived at the idea of using *Equestrian Study in Black and Silver* as the cover for *Amberzine* #12, while illustrating *Blue Horse, Dancing Mountains* with the two chess players. A nice simple idea that did not work: the tale being so short, the two illustrations would have ended crowded together near its end. It just wouldn't fit as a composition within the page layout of *Amberzine*. I then tried to place Suhuy on the back cover as a counterpoint to



Dworkin being on the front cover, but it didn't work out either: it crowded the list of names of the contributors to this issue, and I wanted to make sure that everyone involved got their due in this final *Amberzine* published by Phage Press.

Finally, on my way home from a physical therapy session, a new idea occurred: an illustrated article on the creation of the Dworkin ChessMaster illustration showing photos, preliminary sketches, the first effort and the companion Suhuy ChessMaster. I suggested it to Pierre-Alexandre who responded with, "I like. Great idea[2]." To all the rest of you, I say thanks for putting up with me again, and enjoy.

[2] [PA:] And don't I love being proven right. As a sidenote, I laughed when I read the title for this article. Just a little while ago, as an answer to Mike having sent me an in-progress version of Suhuy, I mentioned that I very much favored his "twisted guys" over the more handsome kind. He thanked me profusely, since, he confessed, he was the main model for most of all his twisted characters, notably Dworkin. (To which I answered that, of course, I meant "twisted" in the nicest possible way.)

"Amberado", like most games I've run at Ambercons, began as a bad joke whilst drinking with my good friend and co-GM Thaddeus Rice after an Ambercon Northwest evening. We were throwing out ideas for terrible genre remixes of Amber, and Westerns kept coming up. I coined the name after Lawrence Kasdan's film "Silverado". Like most bad ideas, it was dropped for further discussion of even worse Amber games. ("Amber of the Apes", another idea borne of that night's drunken energy, has yet to be run.)

When planning the next year's lineup, Thaddeus and I wanted to run one big, special event with cool character sheets, non-Amber enough so only our friends would sign up for it. We couldn't think of anything better, so decided to strap on spurs and six-shooters and run "Amberado". Thaddeus worked up the plot, and we decided the roles the Elders would play. I worked up the character sheets and printed them on 10" x 16" rough brownish paper, like old "Wanted" posters.

The setting was the Old West, with no relation to the Amber universe. It could have been a Shadow of the One True Amber, I guess, but we really didn't care. Old Oberon McAmber was patriarch of the McAmber clan, and with his disappearance, the family was feuding. Corwin was riding back home after years of being in a coma in Mexico, where he'd been left for dead after a duel with Eric. Random, an outlaw gambler, was along for the ride. And Eric was the wealthy cattle baron with Sheriff Julian in his pocket. The others were all appropriate western archtypes... I won't say more, as we might run it again.

AMBERADO

In the early age of the founding of this country, many men went West to FIND THEIR FORTUNES in the vast untamed wilderness of forest, mountain, and desert. One of these was an exceptional man named OBERON McAMBER, a would-be miner, who explored a natural cavern near UNICORN POINT in the area which would become known as New Mexico. Along with his partner, "DOC" DWORKIN, he discovered the AMBERLODE MINE, a rich mine which would make him a Fortune.

From initial excavation, Oberon McAmber took with enough gold to finance the AMBERADO MINING COMPANY. The town of AMBERADO quickly grew around the mine and the mine company. Over the years, Oberon brought a number of Fine Women from across the globe to be his WIVES and MISTRESSES, but they died, ran away, or divorced him. He had MANY CHILDREN in a fairly short time: thirteen in all.

For reasons of his own, he decided that the time had come to pass ownership of the mine onto his OFFSPRING, so he divided it into THIRTEEN EQUAL PARTS, and one day, summoned all of his children back to Amberado and gave a share to each of them. Oberon continued to own the company which actually did the mining, the Amberado Mining Co. (which had EXCLUSIVE RIGHTS to mine the Amberlode). His children continued to do what they would, go where they wanted, and live their lives to the fullest, each of them EXTRAORDINARY in a different way.

A few months after the division of the Amberlode inheritance, Oberon DISAPPEARED. He has been gone for seven months, and an investigation led nowhere. Now, a year after their last reunion, most of the family has been drawn back home, either through DIRECT SUMMONS, COINCIDENCE, or through a STRANGE COMPULSION that they needed to return to town.

Benedict - A military man, oldest son of Oberon McAmber, RETIRED GENERAL Benedict McAmber stands with a proud, military bearing and is rumored to be one of the DEADLIEST SHOTS in the West, in addition to being an EXPERT RIDER, SWORDSMAN, and KNIFE-FIGHTER. He has been decorated for so many awards and defended so many posts that he has given up trying to keep track of his accomplishments. He has not been home since the division of the AMBERLODE.

Bleys - A renowned Celebrity and owner of the REAL WEST EXTRAVAGANZA, Bleys is a SELF-APPOINTED COLONEL and consummate showman, supposedly a FAMOUS INDIAN FIGHTER and the DARLING OF DIME NOVELS galore. He is famous for being a CRACK SHOT, BRILLIANT STRATEGIST, and one of the MOST CHARISMATIC MEN of the Old West. His show is the rival of "BUFFALO" BILL CODY'S, and they despise each other bitterly.

Brand - TROUBLEMAKER and ARTIST of the family, Brand is also the town's NEWSPAPERMAN. He was EDUCATED BACK EAST, and returned to be a JOURNALIST. He also runs the town's CLAIM OFFICE. Brand was the only one to take a real liking to Doc Dworkin, and learned much from the mysterious old coot. His newspaper is SURPRISINGLY WELL-WRITTEN AND PRODUCED, with very REALISTIC LITHOGRAPHIC ILLUSTRATIONS.

Caine - He has been many things: LOVER, LAWYER, SAILOR, LAWMAN, and a SOLDIER, but somehow CAINE McAMBER has always had an untrustworthy side to his personality, which has put him on the WRONG SIDE OF THE LAW more often than not. Generally, he makes his living as a HIRED GUN and is known as a GENERALLY-UNDERHANDED SCOUNDREL. Currently, he is wanted for NUMEROUS CRIMES ACROSS THE TERRITORY.

Corwin - A GUNFIGHTER and COWBOY, Corwin DISAPPEARED while on a horse-buying run with his brother Eric since a few weeks after the division of the AMBERLODE. While Eric was the first SUSPECT, a rumor shortly reached the family that Corwin had GONE CRAZY down in Mexico and committed many HEINOUS CRIMES, and was in custody of the FEDERALES, or in PRISON. This lifted suspicion from Eric, and several family-members went looking for Corwin, to no luck. Corwin was a DEADLY HAND-TO-HAND FIGHTER and PISTOL SHOT.

Deirdre - BEAUTIFUL and ADVENTURESOME, Deirdre cashed in on the tremendous interest in REMARKABLE WOMEN of the UNTAMED WEST: banking on her skill with a rifle, she turned into A SHARPSHOOTER in the mold of her rival, ANNIE OAKLEY. She has traveled far from home, internationally even, sometimes with BILL CODY'S WILD WEST SHOW and more recently with her brother Bleys' rival REAL WEST EXTRAVAGANZA.

Eric - TEMPORARY ACTING HEAD of the Amberado Mining Co., and as such, the RICHEST and MOST POWERFUL MAN in the town, Eric has stepped into the void left by his father's DISAPPEARANCE, running the entire show excellently, though his JEALOUS SIBLINGS barely acknowledge that he is EVERY BIT THE MAN OBERON WAS. Scheming and trying to make a fortune and hold onto his RIGID CONTROL over the town, Eric is a DRIVEN man, much like his father was.

Fiona - The town's SCHOOLMISTRESS, Fiona is PRIM, ATTRACTIVE, WORLDLY, and a little SECRETIVE. Educated and WELL-TRAVELED OVERSEAS, she is HIGHLY INTELLIGENT and easily the most BROAD-MINDED of the family. Because she is UNMARRIED and BOOK-SMART, Fiona has let herself become the one in charge of the UPBRINGING and CHRISTIAN EDUCATION of the townsfolk's small number of children.

Flora - DEVASTATINGLY BEAUTIFUL, Flora has spent her life in THEATER, where she won considerable CRITICAL ACCLAIM before returning home, where her mission was to bring ART to the SCRUFFY MASSES. She has spent a FORTUNE of the family's money building a THEATER, OPERA HOUSE, and LIBRARY, and seen that Amberado is a VITAL STOP on the touring trail for any acting, opera, or dance troupes. Day-to-day, however, she spends her time running the UNICORN, the FAMILY-OWNED WHISKEY-HOUSE.

Gerard - The town's BLACKSMITH and owner of the DRY-GOODS STORE, Gerard is a MASSIVE FIGURE OF A MAN, burly and IMMENSELY STRONG, capable of twisting a horseshoe out of shape and of felling a horse with a few strongly-placed blows. He went into the Navy, spending a decade there. In the evenings, he BARTENDS at the UNICORN, working alongside Flora.

Julian - The town's SHERIFF, allied closely to Eric, he fancies himself the MAIN POWER in the town. Julian believes that his badge makes him INVINCIBLE. His horse MORGANSTERN is a tall mix of Percheron and Clydesdale, and is possibly the largest and MOST POWERFUL HORSE in the West. His SELF-CONTROL is legendary, and he is a competent lawman, though a bit rigid and lacking in the charisma which would elevate him to a greater position.

Llewella - Half-Spanish, Llewella is the daughter of a CUCKOLDED MEXICAN GOVERNOR'S WIFE. When Llewella came to Amberado, Oberon FORMALLY ADOPTED her and gave her a share of the Amberlode. Disliking the family SCHEMES and JEALOUSIES, Llewella has since returned to live in Mexico, in a village just across the border, where she lives with a sisterhood of nuns, living in a convent and working to educate and help the people there.

Random - Youngest of the offspring, an IRASCIBLE CARD-SHARP and GAMBLER, wily and slight, Random has run all sorts of SCHEMES from one end of the country to another, and often returns home to lay low for a while and to escape his "CREDITORS." He's been sent away from the family so often, and been chased away for so many reasons, that he barely calls Amberado his home.

AMBERADO

STRENGTH - 5 ♣

PSYCHE - 3 ♦

ENDURANCE - 5 ♥

WARFARE - K ♠

STUFF - 0

GEAR

Rifle - Sharps 1869 Carbine
* Double Damage

Revolver - Colt .46 Navy Revolver
* Double Damage

Cavalry Saber
* Double Damage

GLENDEMMING - Benedict's horse, an Arabian of peerless musculature and breeding, this fine mount is unusually reddish in color, with black "socks," mane, and tail.
* Double Speed
* Combat Reflexes
* "Devilish" Vitality

BENEDICT

Background

A military man, oldest son of OBERON McAMBER, retired CAVALRY GENERAL BENEDICT McAMBER stands with a proud, military bearing and is rumored to be one of the DEADLIEST SHOTS in the West, an expert RIDER, SWORDSMAN, and KNIFE-FIGHTER. He has been decorated for so many awards and defended so many posts that he has given up trying to keep track of his accomplishments. He is somewhat distant from the rest of the family, having left to join the UNITED STATES ARMY when Eric and Corwin were just children. He has campaigned all across this great country, and has distinguished himself in countless skirmishes against MEXICANS and INDIANS. Despite this, he has returned home to AMBERADO time and again to see his family and tell them tales of what he has been doing. BENEDICT's arm was recently lost in a CAVALRY CHARGE against troublesome INDIANS (a stray shot from a heavy rifle shattered his arm mid-bone, which was then AMPUTATED while he was still unconscious), after which THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA forcibly retired him from active duty.

Appearance

Strong-jawed and tall, Benedict is lean and the OLDEST of the family, being in his late forties. His left arm is missing in mid-bicep, and he has pinned his sleeve up. Despite his retirement, he still wears his tan ARMY UNIFORM, hat, and duster, though his hair is long and wild now.

Secret Knowledge

Recently, while recuperating in the SANITARIUM, Benedict was approached first by an agent claiming to represent a FOREIGN BUYER seeking to purchase his share in the Amberlode mine. Even from his hospital bed, he gave the stranger a SOUND THRASHING and sent him on his way, though the man threatened that there would be more to be said about the matter. Benedict found the entire episode suspicious enough to warrant a return home, and perhaps an extended stay in case the family livelihood was threatened.

AMBERADO

STRENGTH - 4 ♣

PSYCHE - 7 ♦

ENDURANCE - 4 ♥

WARFARE - J ♠

STUFF - +3

GEAR

"WEREWINDLE" - .45 Caliber Colt Revolver. Bleys' UNUSUAL FIREARM is patterned with a MYSTERIOUS AND ORNATE FILIGREE upon the barrel and the name "Werewindle" carven into the grip. This weapon is supposedly one of a MATCHED PAIR. It is being sent by PONY EXPRESS to Amberado, addressed to either FIONA or GERARD.
* Extraordinary Damage

BLEYS

Background

A renowned celebrity and PROMOTER, RINGLEADER, AND OWNER of the REAL WEST EXTRAVAGANZA, BLEYS McAMBER is a self-anointed Colonel and consummate showman, supposedly a famous Indian fighter and the darling of dime novels galore. He is famous for being a crack shot, brilliant strategist, and one of the most charismatic men of the Old West. Though he was not born in the South, he speaks with a distinct and affected Southern accent. His show is the rival of Bill Cody's, and they despise each other bitterly. He travels almost exclusively by train, and has a well-appointed car of his own for his travels. Deirdre has recently joined his show as a sharpshooter, in the vein of Annie Oakley.

Appearance

Bleys dresses flamboyantly, in a pale yellow duster and hat, trimmed with gold and red. He wears a yellow and orange shirt beneath his duster, and a red scarf dangles from his throat. His Colt .45 revolver also bears upon its barrel a bit of the same mysterious filigree as Gerwin's. It has a rosewood grip and the entire surface is actually gold-plated, and serves him well in his trick shooting.

Secret Knowledge

Bleys recently traded his share of the Amberlode mine away to a mysterious man from the Chaos Rail Co., in return for fame and fortune as a showman and celebrity. Unfortunately, Bleys is currently back East, though he has allowed Deirdre to visit town in his stead. He has sent along his golden revolver, with the mysterious inscription "Werewindle" carven into the grip. It will arrive via messenger sometime during the course of the game.

AMBERADO

BRAND

STRENGTH - 3 ♣

PSYCHE - K ♦

ENDURANCE - ? ♥

WARFARE - 3 ♠

STUFF - -5

SPECIAL ABILITIES

Brand has gained several UNUSUAL ABILITIES from his DARK PACT with the FORCES OF DARKENESS.

* IMMUNITY from mortal weapons.
* MESMERISM - clouding and taking over the minds of those weaker than him.
* MENTALISM - the ability to read the minds of those he encounters. He can also do this by observing a photograph or etching of the person in question.
* EXTRA SENSORY abilities to detect the presence of others without seeing them.
* EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION of those around him.
* TRANSPORTATION from one place to another without moving.
* The ability to project lethal BOLTS OF

Background

Troublemaker of the family, Brand is also the town's newspaperman. He was educated back East, and returned to be a journalist. He also runs the town's claim office. Brand was the only one to take a real liking to Doc Dworkin, and learned much from the mysterious old coot, getting the fellow drunk enough to secretly discover the "real" treasure of Amberado, including the nature of Dworkin and the deal with the family inheritance. Since then, he's been trying to steer all of the town's factions against one another, hoping to get enough shares to become "major" owner or to get them into the hands of the Chaos Rail Co. In the meantime, they've recently come near town, and are blasting to clear more land for rails. Brand's newspaper is surprisingly well-written and produced, with very realistic lithographic illustrations.

Appearance

Brand is average in build and red-haired, and usually wears a printer's apron smeared with ink. He carries with him a small notebook and sketch pad. Under his apron, he is usually clad in a plain suit of dark green or black.

Secret Knowledge

Brand has a lot of secrets. Firstly, he has been discretely buying real estate outside of town like mad and selling it to the Chaos Rail Company for a tremendous profit. Secondly, he knows of the secret vein of gold in the Amberlode, and is also privy to the knowledge that this vein holds a far greater secret, one which, if unleashed, could bring him power beyond his wildest dreams! He has long since bartered his share of the Amberlode mine away to the mysterious owner of the Chaos Rail Co., whom he suspects is a demon from Hell. In return, he has gained several strange powers of mind-reading, a kind of mesmerism, and inhuman vitality, making him mostly immune to weapons, though he has not fully tested the immunity. Some of the mysterious rituals he's been doing for power have involved sacrifices of livestock and even humans, and he has ironically reported on the strange deaths to throw suspicion from himself.

AMBERADO

STRENGTH - 5 ♣

PSYCHE - 4 ♦

ENDURANCE - 4 ♥

WARFARE - 5 ♠

STUFF - -3

GEAR

REVOLVERS - Caine has a matched set of silver-embossed Colt Lightning Double-Action Revolvers in .45 caliber, with hilts set with panels of emerald and the front sights filed off - a true shootist's arrangement. He wears them low in a fancy two-gun rig.
* Double Damage

KNIVES - He wears a Bowie Knife in plain sight, a well-made one with a black handle, also set with an emerald, and also has a stiletto, a jackknife, and several other knives, some weighted for throwing, tucked into his clothes and boots.
* Double Damage

DERINGER - Caine carries a small Spanish-made four-shot .22 caliber deringer up his sleeve, and is skilled at dropping it into his hand in a hurry.
* Double Damage

CAINE

Background

He has been many things: **LOVER, LAWYER, SAILOR, LAWMAN,** and a **SOLDIER,** but somehow **CAINE McAMBER** has always had a untrustworthy side to his personality, which has put him on the **WRONG SIDE OF THE LAW** more often than not. Generally, he makes his living as a **HIRED GUN** and is known as a **GENERALLY-UNDERHANDED SCOUNDREL.** Currently, he is wanted for **NUMEROUS CRIMES ACROSS THE TERRITORy** but no lawman who has gone against him has brought him to justice, and his brother **JULIAN, SHERIFF OF AMBERADO,** will not arrest him. Though he never plans to, he inevitibly ends up in the midst of trouble, but fortunately, Caine is intelligent enough to commit crimes away from home, and he uses the town of Amberado as his **REFUGE.** There are those who would claim that he specializes in **SHOOTING PEOPLE IN THE BACK,** or from **AMBUSH,** but those folk generally keep quiet when Caine is around.

Appearance

He is **SWARTHY** and **HANDSOME,** unshaven and somewhat of a **LADY'S MAN.** He wears a fancy silk shirt all of green, a black leather vest and black pants, and his **MATCHED PAIR OF REVOLVERS** are silver and have emerald-inlaid handles. Caine also favors knives, thrown and hand-held, and keeps many tucked about his body in a number of places. He wears a **GREEN BANDANNA WRAPPED** about his head, and his boots are especially fancy, with longer-than-normal points.

Secret Knowledge

Recently, he was **AMBUSHED** by a couple of **NO-GOOD BOUNTY HUNTERS** who caught him with his pants down, literally, while visiting a friend at **A HOUSE OF ILL REPUTE.** Now he's in a stagecoach, being escorted by the bounty hunters who've captured him, and have been **TREATING HIM ROUGHLY** on the trip back into town. Somehow, they learned that he was brother to Sheriff Julian, and figured that they could get more from him than from turning Caine over to the authorities. A couple of months ago, he had an **ODD EXPERIENCE,** where some strange man all in black offered him a **FORTUNE** for his share in the **AMBERLODE MINE.** He didn't take the deal, perhaps because his share of the Amberlode mine is in Julian's **SAFE KEEPING.**

AMBERADO

STRENGTH - 7 ♣

PSYCHE - 6 ♦

ENDURANCE - K ♥

WARFARE - Q ♠

STUFF - -1

GEAR

RIFLE - Winchester .45 Caliber Repeater.
* Double Damage

"SMOKE" - Corwin's horse. A Mexican paint, all black and gray. No exceptional qualities.

SILVER SCALED SPURS - Lost when Corwin was injured, they were taken by Llewella from his room in Amberado and have just been given back to him.
* Double Damage

"GRAYSWANDIR" - .45 Caliber Colt Revolver. Corwin's UNUSUAL FIREARM is patterned with a MYSTERIOUS AND ORNATE FILIGREE upon the barrel and the name "Grayswandir" carved into the grip. This weapon is one of a MATCHED PAIR, the other held by BLEYS McAMBER. It disappeared when Corwin was shot, but turned up in the hands of Llewella, who gave it to him.
* Extraordinary Damage

CORWIN

Background

A horseman, cowboy, GUNFIGHTER, who has become an AMNESIAC and an ESCAPEE FROM A HELLISH MEXICAN PRISON. Unfortunately, Corwin was injured in the head apparently in the midst of trying to escape a MEXICAN POSSE, who were hot on his trail. He cannot remember much about his life before that, or even the nature of his OFFENSES. All he has to go on is the scar from a bullet-wound in the back of his skull, an injury which would have killed any other man. He woke in a the custody of the FEDERALES in Mexico, and was shortly sentenced to a series of hellish prisons where he endured HARD LABOR for almost a year, not knowing who he was, a MAN WITH NO NAME. He grew strong and recovered from the injury. One day ago, he was SPRUNG from his prison by a wild, reckless man named RANDOM McAMBER, who claimed to be his brother. When Corwin heard the name "AMBERADO" he knew he'd find his answers there, and with Random, he is on his way back home, bits and pieces of his memory returning as he goes. Random claims that a brother named ERIC is responsible for this state, and the rush of hatred for that name is clue enough that THERE SHOULD BE A RECKONING. With Random, Corwin is fleeing the Federales; they have taken refuge in a MISSION HOUSE on the Mexican border, near Amberado, sheltered by their half-sister LLEWELLA, a nun. She has returned to him his SILVER SPURS, which she claimed to have found in his room, though neither she nor Random knows what has become of his treasured revolver GRAYSWANDIR.

Appearance

GREEN-EYED, BLACK-HAIRED, and RUGGEDLY HANDSOME, Corwin is lean and strong, a DEADLY SHOOTIST and a CUNNING HAND-TO-HAND FIGHTER. He wears ALL BLACK - over his breeches, his shirt, and his boots, he wears a BLACK AND GREY SERAPE and a black hat with silver trim. His SILVER SPURS are ornate, scaled, and sharpened for dirty fighting.

Secret Knowledge

Corwin's BIGGEST SECRET is that he has LOST MUCH OF HIS MEMORY, and that he has a VIVID HATRED of his brother Eric. With Random's urging, he has connected the two and has come to the conclusion that ERIC IS RESPONSIBLE for his sentencing and his NEAR-FATAL GUNSHOT WOUND TO THE HEAD.

AMBERADO

STRENGTH - 4 ♣

PSYCHE - 4 ♦

ENDURANCE - 6 ♥

WARFARE - J ♠

STUFF - +3

GEAR

LONG-RIFLE - Deirdre wields a long-barrelled Sharps 1869 Carbine in .60 Caliber, a serious weapon capable of dropping a buffalo at a single, well-placed shot. This particular model is a beauty, black-handled and silver-inlaid, with a flip-up sight which increases her accuracy to incredible range.
* Deadly Damage

DEIRDRE

Background

BEAUTIFUL AND ADVENTURESOME, DEIRDRE McAMBER has always been something of a **TOMBOY**, learning the cowboy arts of **RIDING, ROPING,** and **SHOOTING** alongside her brothers. Lately, she has cashed in on the tremendous interest in **REMARKABLE WOMEN** of the **UNTAMED WEST**: banking on her considerable skill with a pistol and rifle, she has turned into a **SHARPSHOOTER** in the mold of another famous woman shootist, **ANNIE OAKLEY**. Deirdre has traveled far from home in her exploration of the world outside **AMBERADO**, even internationally, sometimes with "**BUFFALO**" **BILL CODY'S WILD WEST SHOW**, and more recently with her brother Bleys' rival show, the **REAL WEST EXTRAVAGANZA**. A highly-skilled **SHOOTIST**, she is also a trick rider, and a lassoist of considerable talent. Deirdre was fondest of Corwin of all the siblings, and has had the suspicion he would return soon. She has always suspected Eric of some wrongdoing in the matter, and when Eric began calling the shots with the **AMBERADO MINING COMPANY**, she made herself scarce in town, spending much of her time with Bleys' **REAL WEST EXTRAVAGANZA**.

Appearance

Most of the time, Deirdre wears fine, "**DUDE**" **STYLE CLOTHES**, though cut for a lady, of grey and black, a long-coat and high boots, and wears at her belt a black-handled pistol. She carries in a black wood and leather shoulder case the weapon with which she makes her trade, a **LONG-BARRELED SHARPS RIFLE** with a flip-up sight, and is always packing a distinctly cowboylike belt of **AMMUNITION** and a well-worn **LARIAT** over her shoulder.

Motivation

Deirdre worries that Corwin's eventual showdown with Eric will tear the town apart and likely kill both of them. Despite a generous offer from the **CHAOS RAIL COMPANY**, Deirdre still has her share in the Amberlode mine. She is just arriving in town, having left Bleys with his Real Western Extravaganza back East.

AMBERADO

STRENGTH - 7 ♣

PSYCHE - 5 ♦

ENDURANCE - 7 ♥

WARFARE - J ♠

STUFF - +1

GEAR

REVOLVERS - Eric wears a matched pair of black-handled silver-embossed .44 Colt Dragoon Model Revolvers given him as a gift from the PRESIDENT.
* Double Damage

SABER - Eric treasures a pearl-gripped Silvery Saber, embossed with beautiful curliques given him by the GOVERNOR of the province in MEXICO.
* Double Damage

"DRUM" - His faithful horse is a tamed Indian stallion, broken by Eric himself. Drum is a fearless mount, and Eric has taken it on many a hellish ride through darkened lands.
* "Hellish" Vitality
* Double Speed
* Double Stamina
* Combat Training

ERIC

Background

Temporary acting HEAD OF THE AMBERADO MINING COMPANY, and as such, the MOST POWERFUL MAN IN THE TOWN, Eric has stepped into the void left by his father's disappearance, running the show easily, though his siblings refuse to acknowledge that he is EVERY BIT THE MAN Oberon was. Scheming and trying to make a fortune and hold onto his RIGID CONTROL over the town, he is privy to something few know about – that there are MYSTERIOUS UNWORKED TUNNELS in the Amberlode, and in this cave is a VEIN RICHER THAN ANYTHING MINED SO FAR. He is RELUCTANT to let this be public knowledge, as he suspects something UNUSUAL about the cavern, and thinks there is a good reason for OBERON having it sealed. Eric discovered its existence from a miner who shortly thereafter TURNED UP DEAD (not Eric's doing). Now Eric is haunted by NIGHTMARES that the place is somehow EVIL, and that others among his family are trying to exploit it for themselves. As for Corwin... he and Eric went into Mexico on a horse purchase. They argued, and IN THE ENSUING GUNFIGHT, Eric put a bullet into the back of Corwin's head in a FREAK ACCIDENT (Corwin slipped and fell as he spun to shoot). Panicking, Eric paid a CORRUPT MEXICAN GOVERNOR to put Corwin IN PRISON ON FALSE CHARGES, and to send word to the family to back Eric's story, knowing that they would never be able to find Corwin or break him loose, due to the HATRED the governor has for OBERON McAMBER'S FAMILY. Eric has been feeling GUILTY about it, even though he's relieved to see Corwin out of the picture. He stashed Corwin's gun GRAYSWANDIR and SILVER SCALED SPURS in Oberon's old safe.

Appearance

Eric is BURLY and black-bearded, physically strong and CAPABLE OF BEATING MOST NORMAL MEN in a fight. He is usually clad in a fancy white shirt, red tie, an EXCELLENTLY TAILORED BLACK SUIT, a black leather duster and gloves, with a pair of revolvers at his hips in a black leather holsters and a ruby-studded belt. He is often smoking expensive black cigars, imported from back East.

Secrets

Recently, Eric has been approached by an AGENT OF SOME UNKNOWN POWER trying to purchase his share in the AMBERLODE. He turned the LOWLY CUR away, but has been wondering which of his WEAKER BROTHERS AND SISTERS may have succumbed to the DASTARDLY DEAL. Currently, Eric is keeping Corwin's share in the Amberlode hidden away, along with HIS BROTHER'S REVOLVER "GRAYSWANDIR." Eric has just gotten a TELEGRAM from the Mexican governor that Corwin has ESCAPED FROM THE HELLISH PRISON, assisted by another YOUNG GRINGO, and that they are heading up North towards Amberado, EVADING THEIR PURSUERS. They should be arriving any hour.

AMBERLODE

STRENGTH - 2 ♣
PSYCHE - 0 ♦
ENDURANCE - 3 ♥
WARFARE - 3 ♠
STUFF - 0

GEAR

STILETTO - Fiona keeps a small stiletto tucked into her bodice, in the event of trouble: it is unexceptional in any manner.

SPECIAL ABILITIES

Fiona has gained several UNUSUAL ABILITIES from her EVIL PACT with the FORCES OF DARKNESS.

- MESMERISM - clouding and taking over the minds of those weaker than her.
- MENTALISM - the ability to read the minds of those she encounters. She can also do this by observing a photograph or etching of the person in question.
- EXTRA-SENSORY abilities to detect the presence of others without seeing them.
- EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION of those around her.
- Fiona is an exceptional MEDIUM, able to summon and control the spirits of the dead.
- FORTUNE-TELLING from using her deck of elaborate TAROT CARDS.

FIONA

Background

The town's SCHOOLMISTRESS by default, as she is clearly the most educated of the family, FIONA McAMBER is PRIM, ATTRACTIVE, AND WORLDLY, and seems to have more secrets than anyone can divine. Educated and WELL-TRAVELED overseas, she is highly intelligent and easily the most broad-minded of the family. Because she is UNMARRIED and BOOK-SMART, Fiona has let herself become the one in charge of the upbringing and education of the townsfolk's small number of children. Her real passion is the occult, however, and she is AMORAL in all aspects of this DARK ART. Hence, from her extensive studies, Fiona is a MESMERIST, a MEDIUM, and a SPIRITUALIST of the highest order, studied in the occult and knowledgeable about OBSCURE PHILOSOPHIES and SECRET LORE.

Appearance

Small and red-haired, possessing a rare and fine beauty, skin like milk and eyes of the deepest green, Fiona styles herself as a prim and proper lady of the old West. She wears well-made and exceptional dresses, often made of dark green, imported from fine dressmakers in New York, London, and Paris. She often wears gloves and a hat, and is usually carrying a book and a handkerchief, scented with rose-water.

Secret Knowledge

Unbeknownst to the rest of the family, she has made pacts with a demon named Swayril which she encountered in a seance, during her extensive travels, selling her share in the AMBERLODE MINE, in addition to her immortal soul, in exchange for strange powers and secret knowledge. With her powers, she is aware that there is a mysterious power buried beneath the town, and knows somehow that Brand is connected to it, but is uncertain as to its nature and Brand's plans with it. She does know, however, that he has been involved in some some surreptitious mutilation of animals and perhaps humans, though she gained the knowledge while she was on her way to a sacred INDIAN BURIAL GROUND to pillage for magical implements and bones, raise some spirits, and to make a sacrifice of her own.

AMBERADO

STRENGTH - 4 ♣

PSYCHE - 3 ♦

ENDURANCE - 5 ♥

WARFARE - 6 ♠

STUFF - +4

GEAR

DERINGER - Flora keeps a tiny Colt .22 Caliber Deringer tucked into her garter.
* Double Damage

FLORA

Background

DEVASTATINGLY BEAUTIFUL, Flora has spent much of her life as a member of the THEATER, where she won considerable critical acclaim, before returning home, where her mission was to bring HIGH ART to the unshaven, unwashed masses who fill the West. She has seduced or been romanced by princes, counts, kings, and presidents. The town's most outspoken member of the arts community, as such, Flora has spent a considerable amount of the family's money building a theater/opera house and a small library for the town's EDIFICATION, and she uses all of her resources to see to it that Amberado is a vital stop on the touring trail for any acting, opera, or dance troupes. Day-to-day, however, she spends much of her time running the UNICORN, the family-owned whiskey-house (no mere saloon, this is a HIGH-CLASS ESTABLISHMENT, to be sure), and is responsible for maintaining that saloon's finances, gambling, and entertainment services. Though she actually dwells at the family estate, she has a fairly comfortable suite of her own at the bar, and she keeps to herself most of the time, well out of Eric's way. Despite her obvious taste and refinement, some particularly UNSAVORY RUMORS about her PERSONAL LIFE (outside Amberado) have followed her. Flora is not shy about her smoking (a distinctly unladylike habit). She spends a lot of time REMINISCING about her EXPLOITS, NAME-DROPPING, and EMPHASIZING HER SUPERIORITY in all things cultural.

Appearance

Beautiful, charming, refined, and clearly THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN THE OLD WEST. She dresses in finery, and is usually perfectly composed, down to the last strand of hair. She keeps a stiletto tucked into her bodice, along with a derringer in her garter.

Secret Knowledge

As bar-owner of the UNICORN, Flora sees much of the comings and goings of her brethren, especially when they drink too much and forget that she is listening. She knows that Eric had something to do with CORWIN'S DISAPPEARANCE, that Brand is up to something mysterious out of town, that the folk of the CHAOS RAIL CO. behave oddly and have made offers for shares of the family's AMBERLODE mine, and that Fiona is not what she seems.

ARMORADO

STRENGTH - K ♣

PSYCHE - 2 ♦

ENDURANCE - J ♥

WARFARE - 10 ♠

STUFF - +3

GEAR

SHOTGUN - Gerard keeps a double-barrel sawed-off 10-gauge shotgun underneath the bar, at the **UNICORN** when he is bartending.
* Double Damage

CUTLASS - A relic from his **NAVY** days, Gerard's heavy cutlass hangs in its scabbard over the bar at the **UNICORN**. It is in excellent shape, and Gerard often polishes it and sharpens the edge, keeping it in fighting trim.
* Double Damage

GERARD

Background

The town's **BLACKSMITH** and owner of the town's sole dry-goods store, **GERARD McAMBER** is a **MASSIVE FIGURE** of a man, **BURLY** and **IMMENSELY STRONG**, capable of twisting a horseshoe out of shape and of felling a horse with a **FEW STRONGLY-PLACED BLOWS**. He is basically peaceful in spirit and slow to anger, though nothing brings him to a rage quicker than being mocked, or when he thinks people are trying to manipulate him. Nonetheless, Gerard is thoroughly **DEVOTED** to the town, and tends to know a lot more than he speaks of. He has a streak of common-sensedness, or a folky wisdom, and is extremely sentimental. Like Benedict, Gerard joined the **ARMED SERVICES**, though he found his calling in the **NAVY**, spending a decade there, excelling in **BOXING** and **CUTLASS-WORK**. Gerard can usually be found in his blacksmith shop during the day. In the evenings, he often spends time bartending at the **UNICORN SALOON**, working alongside his sister Flora. No-one would dare start a fight with huge Gerard behind the bar, so the place remains peaceful and safe most of the time.

Appearance

Massive in size and covered with **HARD SLABS OF MUSCLE**, Gerard is an impressive and intimidating figure, despite his generally likable nature. He usually wears a stained pair of coveralls and a ragged shirt beneath, with thick leather gloves, and **A HEAVY SLEDGE-HAMMER** is often in his fist, or nearby. Though his fists are almost always more than enough in any fight, Gerard keeps a saw-off double-barrel 10-gauge shotgun underneath the bar at the **UNICORN** when he is bartering. There he wears a nicer set of clothing and the everyday white barkeep apron. He often smokes a pipe.

Secret Knowledge

Sensibly, when approached by the agents of the **CHAOS RAIL COMPANY**, Gerard kept his share of the mine, and offered to break the neck of the next man who attempted to purchase it from him.

AMBERADO

JULIAN

STRENGTH - 6 ♣

PSYCHE - 4 ♦

ENDURANCE - 6 ♥

WARFARE - 9 ♠

STUFF - -2

GEAR

"MORGANSTERN" - Potentially the largest and MOST POWERFUL horse in the Old West, this immense stallion is FAMED throughout the TERRITORY. People come from miles around just to look at this fine mount, and Julian has been offered, and refused, fortunes for the magnificent horse.

* Amber Vitality
* Engine Speed
* Endless Stamina
* Combat Mastery

REVOLVER - Julian carries a large, serviceable Colt Model .45 Revolver.

* Double Damage

SCATTERGUN - A Loomis .15 Double-Barreled Double-Action Shotgun, heavy and lethal.

* Double Damage

Background

The town's DULY-ELECTED SHERIFF, allied closely to Eric, JULIAN McAMBER considers himself the main power in the town. He believes that his badge makes him INVINCIBLE. His magnificent horse MORGANSTERN is a tall mix of Percheron and Clydesdale; it is possibly the LARGEST AND MOST POWERFUL HORSE in the WILD WEST, and the tale of its taming is a legend in its own right. Julian is partial to CARD-PLAYING, though he refuses to admit that he isn't very lucky at them, and he often accuses others of CHEATING when he loses. Because of his bluntness, he is much unlike his conniving, more subtle brothers and sisters, and they tend to dislike him for SPEAKING HIS MIND. His SELF-CONTROL IS LEGENDARY, and he is still a competent lawman, though a bit rigid and lacking in the charisma which would elevate him to a greater position in the county.

Appearance

Fairly lean and a little over average height, Julian is BLACK-HAIRED and has a thick moustache. He dresses in a white shirt and an almost-white duster, with a white hat, and he is EXTREMELY PARTICULAR about not getting dirt on himself. The SILVER STAR BADGE on his vest is polished to a mirror-brightness, and he often polishes it during conversations. Julian typically uses a revolver, and often carries a SCATTERGUN over his shoulder while on his rounds. He has a SMALL ARSENAL of other guns in the Sheriff's office, where he lives.

Secret Knowledge

Julian has received a telegraph from the BOUNTY HUNTER DUO which captured his brother CAINE, informing him that they're heading into town for a reward (against turning him over to the law). He's also been investigating a string of STRANGE CATTLE AND HORSE KILLINGS which have happened in the scrub woods surrounding the town, and the possible connection with some disappearances from the town, one of which turned up HORRIBLY MUTILATED. Despite a recent offer, Julian has held onto his share of the AMBERLODE MINE, and is secretly holding Caine's for safekeeping, but has reported to Eric that a bid has been made for his share, bankrolled by the CHAOS RAIL Co., which has been laying BLACK RAILS outside town on its way across the country, shaking the town with BLASTING.

AMBERADO

STRENGTH - 4 ♣

PSYCHE - 5 ♦

ENDURANCE - 4 ♥

WARFARE - 6 ♠

STUFF - +2

LLEWELLA

Background

HALF-SPANISH and a striking-looking woman, with raven-black hair and deep, surprisingly bright green eyes, LLEWELLA SANTIAGO is the daughter of a CUCKOLDED MEXICAN GOVERNOR who did business with Oberon McAmber. While negotiating with the governor for cattle, Oberon McAmber became enchanted with the governor's wife, A SULTRY SPANISH BEAUTY. One thing led to another, and she became pregnant with OBERON'S CHILD. When the child was born and it became obvious that she was no daughter of the governor, he sent his wife back to Spain. She died in CHILDBIRTH. When Llewella was old enough to make the journey back to the United States, she was sent to Amberado with a letter about her TRUE PARENTAGE. Since she bore the family features, Oberon realized at once that she was his child, and he formally adopted her and gave her a share of the AMBERLODE mine, like the others. Disliking the FAMILY SCHEMES AND JEALOUSIES, Llewella has since returned to live in Mexico, in a small village just ACROSS THE BORDER, where she has lives with an order of of nuns, living in a MONASTERY and working to educate and help the people there.

Appearance

Llewella is very attractive, dark haired, and dresses in plain clothing of black and green, usually along with a black sombrero and a shawl in an Old Spanish traditional mode of dress.

Secret Knowledge

About six months ago, while staying with the family, she found her way into OBERON's office. The LOCK-SAFE was ajar, and she checked inside, finding her brother Corwin's SILVER SCALED SPURS and his special REVOLVER, GRAYSWANDIR. Random and Corwin are now taking refuge with her, as Random broke Corwin out of jail. They are being sought by a group of VENGEFUL FEDERALES. Llewella has just given Corwin back his spurs and gun.

RANDOM AMBERADO

STRENGTH - 5 ♣

PSYCHE - 5 ♦

ENDURANCE - 6 ♥

WARFARE - J ♠

STUFF - 0

GEAR

REVOLVERS - A matched pair of Manhattan .36 Double-Action Revolvers in a speed-draw holt. A fancy, and rare rig, but one which suits the young ruffian.
" Double Damage

DERINGER - A Marlin O.K. Model Single-Shot Deringer, retooled for .36 ammo. Random has a couple of these hidden about his person.
" Double Damage

IAGO - A Pinto stallion, smallish but extremely fast, with a well-made saddle. All that Random owns in the world is in the saddlebags.
" Double Speed

RANDOM

Background

An IRREDEEMABLE CARD-SHARP and GAMBLER, wily and slight, RANDOM McAMBER has run all sorts of schemes from one end of the country to another, and often returns home to lay low for a while and to escape his "CREDITORS." Despite his SCOUNDREL-LIKE APPEARANCE, he is scrupulously honest in card-playing, but his skill at reading people is so great that he is often MISTAKEN FOR A CHEAT. He's been sent away from the family so often, and been chased away for so many reasons, that he barely calls Amberado his home. Recently, by INCREDIBLE COINCIDENCE, he was traveling in MEXICO, gambling and drinking mostly, sitting outside a cantina, when he saw a miserable PRESS GANG go by. One of the men stood out, a white man, who was also a DEAD-RINGER for his long-missing brother CORWIN. One half-assed ESCAPE PLAN later, the two brothers, REUNITED AT LAST, are riding like madmen to get out of Mexico, with a VENGEFUL PARTY OF FEDERALES HOT ON THEIR TRAIL. Random has taken them to a mission near the border, run by their half-sister LLEWELLA, a nun who's keeping them hidden until the COAST IS CLEAR. At this point, they'll ride back home to Amberado, where Random will likely see his DETESTABLE BROTHER Eric killed.

Description

Short and slim, Random is little more than a CALLOW YOUTH, barely out of his teens. He is SHARP-FEATURED and a bit of a DANDY, and wears a well-made if rumpled brown suit and snap-brimmed fedora, along with a FANCY TWO-GUN GUNFIGHTERS RIG across his hips. He also keeps a small derringer in his boot.

Secret Knowledge

Random knows two interesting pieces of information. Firstly, that his brother Corwin is STILL ALIVE, though AMNESIAC. Random has been doing his best to get Corwin informed about what's been going on, and to point him towards Eric with a gun in his hand. Secondly, that someone mysterious is trying to collect shares

What has gone on before:

Banished from Amber, Morgan, Carolan and Harlan were forced to flee. Caine, with the help of Julian and Derek, Julian's son, was after Carolan, as was Solem, for reasons detailed in the following story. Harlan, incenstuous son of Jaeger and his sister Nara, was being hunted by the former for having killed the latter. Harlan, together with Morgan, was also hunted by Deirdre and Corwin, each wielding the powers of the Jewel of Judgment, for the killing of Damien, Deirdre's son. Morgan's children, though never formally sentenced, were considered guilty of consorting with outlaws. Besides, while trying to rescue their father, they had killed several of Random's guards, one of whom was found partially eaten. Wolves will be wolves, but they doubted Random would see it that way.

In fleeing from their collective enemies, the outlawed band found Rebma and the Courts closed to them. Hounded from Shadow to Shadow, they were attacked at every turn. Eventually, they came to a place whose nature was to become less ruined the longer one stayed. There they met Dworban, the elder brother of Dworkin, who considered his own personal sin to be that of creation. In particular, he had created Dworban's Gate, in whose sky many universes shone as stars, the very Pattern universe among them. Through this Gate, the fugitives fled to discover whole new realities, complete with new sources of power, but with very familiar conflicts between order and chaos.

The Pursuit of Innocence

By Cathy Klessig
Illustrated by Michael Kucharski
From Erick Wujcik's Wolfing Campaign

Morgan and his fellow outlaws were trying to think of some place where they might be safe from their enemies. So far, nothing had worked. Carolan and Harlan, T'Pring and Rudra and Morwena...none of them had anything promising to offer.

Finally Morgan said, "We're not having any luck, looking for a place where we can't be found. Why don't we try the place, of all the places hospitable to us, where it will take the longest for our enemies to find us?"

The others agreed. So Rudra focused his unique-and-hopefully-untraceable new powers, and focusing them through the spider-webbed handmirror, he willed them to be in such a place.

It was a cow pasture. A few cows grazed, not too near. The grass at the party's feet was dotted with cow droppings. It was all stunningly peaceful and mundane.

"This is an outlying Shadow," Rudra explained.

"Okay," said Morgan. "We ought to move toward the power center of this Universe. There should be something like a Pattern here, and we

have to walk it."

"If this place is hospitable to us, as I specified, that should work," Rudra agreed.

"I suppose this is one of those places where you have to wear clothes," Morwena remarked, turning to dig in one of Pegasus's saddlebags. She still thought of herself basically as a wolf, and she only wore clothes to be polite.

Carolan grinned. "Hey, Morwena, how about helping me make sure all my equipment works?"

Morwena turned to him, smiling. "Now, how am I to take that, Carolan?"

"Well, I'm a guy, and you're a girl. Let's make sure everything works right." Carolan's lascivious grin left no further doubt of regarding his meaning.

Morwena actually blushed. But it looked more like indignation than modesty. "In a cow pasture?"

"Why not?"

"That's my sister you're talking to," Rudra reminded Carolan.

"I'm sorry, Carolan," said Morwena, a bit coldly. "But wolves mate for life. You're my friend, but I think I'll wait until I meet my mate."

Carolan looked at Morwena, startled. "You mean, with all the Universes to choose from, you're going to lock yourself into having sex with just one person?"

"Having one mate has worked very well for my mother," Morwena replied. "I think it will work for me, too."

"Well, if you find your soul mate, I guess that might work out," said Carolan, looking dubious. "But, suppose you don't find him. Eternity's an awfully long time, Morwena."

"With all the Shadows in existence, and all that time, I'm sure I'll find him," said Morwena. "It's a matter of destiny. Maybe someday I'll walk through Shadow until I find the right person. That's what Dad did, and look how well it's worked out."

"In the meantime, you can't have any fun," said Carolan, with the air of producing a clinching argument.

"Of course I can have fun," said Morwena with dignity. "I just

can't have sex."

Carolan shrugged, dropping the subject.

They found that not only couldn't they walk through Shadow, or use Trumps but that Pegasus couldn't move through Shadow either. The Pegasus was not merely Carolan's steed of choice, the winged stallion was a god. He and Carolan had meet in the mountians in a Shadow called Annwyn, and from that chance meeting, a deep bond of friendship developed. Pegasus's powers, although independent of the Pattern or Logrus did not seem to work, so Rudra transported them to a road in a forest, near the local equivalent of Amber. From there, they decided to walk. Carolan, impatient with the slow pace, flew ahead on Pegasus.

From the air, Carolan could see the mountain where all the local roads converged. On the mountain was a grey stone castle. Its austere lines had a stark beauty, more of a fortress than a palace. The sky above it was a clear, silvery grey, and the sunlight was pure white.

He was met by an armored man, mounted on a flying sphinx. They landed to talk. The stranger was a young man, with violet eyes and long, curly black hair, named Asolph. They were able to establish that the local equivalent of walking the Pattern was called 'descending into Greyfall.' But Asolph insisted scornfully that Carolan could never survive it. Finally, though, he agreed to present Carolan's request to the King.

Asolph took out a small instrument that looked like a silver tuning fork. He held it for a moment, seeming to concentrate. Then he struck it against his leg, and began to speak to it, as if it were a microphone...or a Trump. He relayed Carolan's request to someone he called "Faustus," and received permission to bring Carolan to the Castle. Then he used the tuning fork to transport himself, Carolan, and Pegasus into a large hall of silvery-grey stone. They appeared before a throne, where a man was seated, with a woman standing beside him.

The King was a young man, who bore a strong family resemblance

to Asolph. He had the same violet eyes, but his hair was a dark rust color. The woman even more closely resembled Asolph, since her hair was black. Her cream-colored gown showed off a figure that was slender, but hard and fit. A scar on the left side of her face accentuated, rather than marred, her beauty. Carolan felt that all three of them were warriors, who kept themselves ready for battle.

Asolph and Carolan both bowed toward the throne. The King returned a polite nod. "Prince Carolan, welcome to the Court of Greyfall," he said. "You have met my brother, General Asolph. And this —" he gestured to the woman by the throne "— is my sister, the Lady Winized."

Carolan made a courtly bow to the lady, and said, "Your Majesty, thank you for your welcome. I come to you in peace, and desire the boon of descending into Greyfall."

"A rather dangerous boon," said the King. "Are you aware that only a member of the royal family may descend into Greyfall and live?"

"I feel confident that I also may accomplish this, Your Majesty," said Carolan. "If I am wrong, I will abide the consequences."

King Faustus considered this gravely for a moment. "Will you permit the Lady Winized to read your mind, that we may judge your intent?" he asked.

"I will, Your Majesty."

He stood calmly, and allowed Winized to establish contact with his mind. Her touch was gentle, but probed deeply.

Within the contact, Carolan reached back to her, touching her mind in return. She blushed, startled. "Sir Carolan!" she exclaimed.

"Did he hurt you?" General Asolph demanded, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Oh, no," she said. "But his mind is far more powerful than I had expected."

Carolan turned to Faustus, and said gravely, "As proof of my good faith, I will take an oath of fealty to Greyfall."

"You spoke of your Pattern," said King Faustus. "Have you no loyalty to it?"

"I have, Your Majesty. But I see no conflict between the Pattern and Greyfall. I believe they are one and the same."

"And will you take an oath to the royal family of Greyfall, as well?" asked the King.

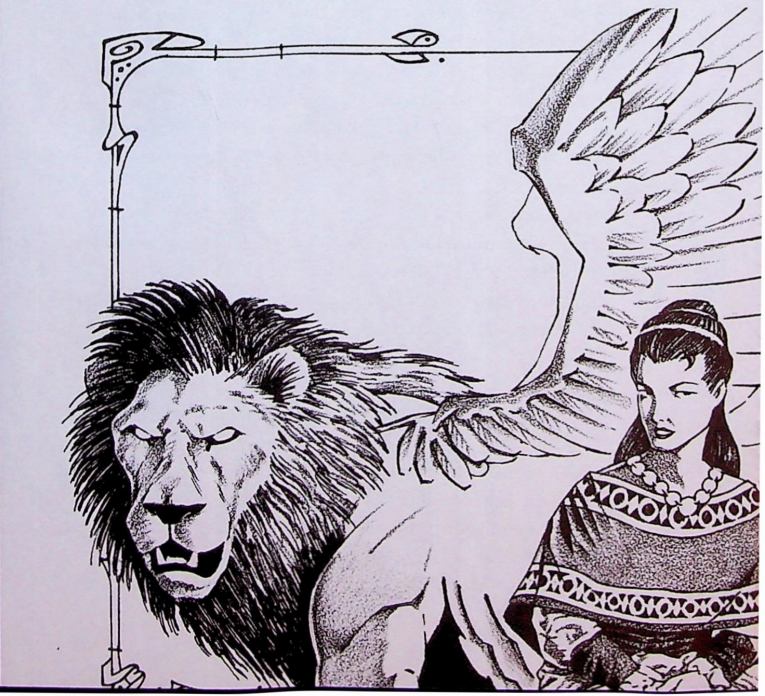
Carolan hesitated. "I don't know you," he said. "How do I know you're worthy?"

General Asolph cried out, "Sire, let me avenge this insult!"

"No," said the King firmly. "He speaks with wisdom. He does not know us. Prince Carolan, I will consider what you have said."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," said Carolan, bowing his respect.

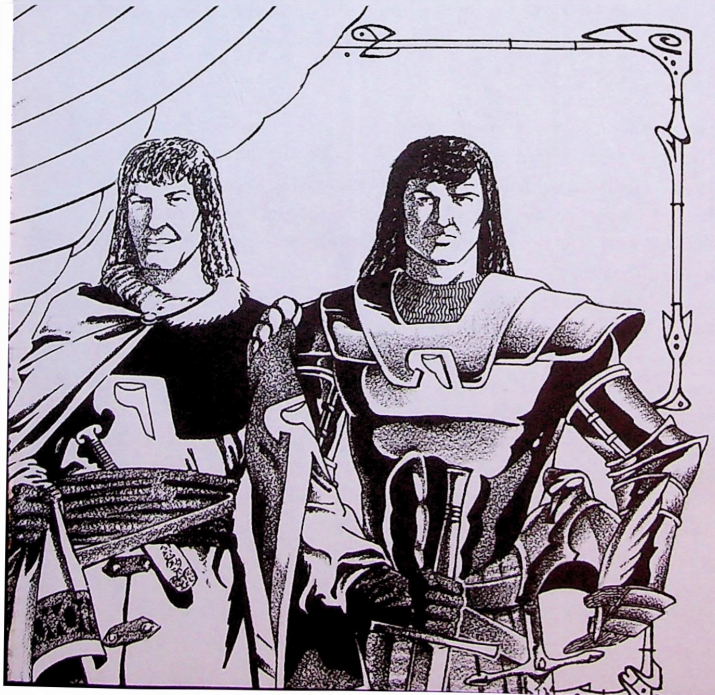
Shortly thereafter, Morgan and the others arrived. There were more introductions, and all the Amberites formally requested permission to descend into Greyfall. King Faustus repeated that he would consider it.



Then he ordered dinner, and the Amberites were seated across from the Greyfall royals.

"Tell us of Amber, and of your journey from that place," the King asked Morgan.

Morgan looked grave. "Amber is a troubled land. Our royal family is far larger than yours. The original King of Amber was my grandfather, Oberon. He reigned for millennia, and had nearly a score of children, who had children and grandchildren of their own. Among so many, perhaps the growth of factions was inevitable. Some time ago, King Oberon disappeared for a long while. During his absence, his sons and daughters plotted against each other. And one brother became evil, and entered into a league with



Chaos.

"Fortunately, this had one good effect: most of the others united against him. Also, at a crucial moment Oberon returned to aid the supporters of Amber. The evil brother was defeated in a great battle, which took place at the very edge of the Abyss. He was shot with a crossbow, and fell over the edge. And he managed to drag one of his sisters over the edge with him, who had been loyal to Amber."

"They were destroyed, then," said General Asolph.

"They were not," said Morgan. "It was thought they had perished. But they lived."

"How is this possible?" asked King Faustus. "To fall into the Abyss, and not be destroyed?"

"We do not truly know," Morgan replied. "The evil brother was very powerful. Perhaps he and his sister were preserved by his spells. At any rate, they did finally return. The evil brother was killed, once and for all. But the sister, Deirdre, lived."

Morgan shook his head sadly. "Unfortunately, Oberon had died in the original war against the evil brother. One of his sons, Random, became King of Amber, and rules to this day. When Deirdre returned, she plotted against Random, saying she had never sworn him fealty. She also entangled her son, Damien, in her plots. Discovering this, I myself confronted Damien, demanding that he return to his allegiance to Amber. And, when he would not do this, I killed him."

Morgan smiled bitterly. "It was one of life's ironies that, just at that time, Deirdre was making peace with her brothers and sisters in Amber. If I had known...but I did not. It was done; there was no way to bring Damien back from the Land of the Dead."

The throne room was silent, as Morgan sighed deeply. "Deirdre is my implacable enemy," he said. "She has turned others against me, poisoned Random's mind. Finally I, and all these my family and friends, were outlawed, forced to flee for our lives. So we come to your realm, King Faustus, seeking sanctuary. We ask to descend into Greyfall, to regain our powers, which in Amber were similar to your own, and hereafter to become your supporters and allies against Chaos. We are used to fighting against Chaos, in Amber, and have known our victories. I think you will find our

help to be worth having."

"I...see," said King Faustus. "Well, Prince Morgan, this is a strange tale, and a sad one. I feel for you, in your exile. But I cannot undertake such a step without taking time to consider."

"I understand, Your Majesty," Morgan replied. "I will give you whatever proof of good faith lies within my power. We will all swear to defend Greyfall, to the utmost of our strength. It even occurs to me that I have an unmarried daughter, and you a most lovely sister. Our alliance might, if you are willing, be cemented by a royal marriage, or marriages."

Morwena nearly swallowed her fork, but made no actual comment, and managed after a moment to blank her expression. Carolan regarded their hosts soberly.

"Another serious step," said Faustus. "But I will not say yea or nay to any of this, until I have slept on it. I will meet with you again tomorrow, and tell you my decision."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," said Morgan, with the grave courtesy of one royal person settling important affairs with another. The conversation became more general. In due course the dinner broke up, and Morgan's party were shown to their guest chambers.

The next day, the Amberites spent the morning in various ways. Some used the practice field, some the library. Rudra was shown around by a young lady of the Court named Tumis. Morwena found her way to the armory, and helped with the making of a sword.

At the end of the morning, Carolan came to escort Morwena back to her room, to clean up before luncheon with King Faustus. As they walked together, Carolan asked Morwena what she thought of Morgan's suggestion about royal marriages.

"I don't want to offend our hosts, or make trouble for Dad," she said. "But, I feel very awkward about it. The idea of mating with a man I

hardly know.... Besides, what if our enemies should track us here? We'd have to flee, and if I'd taken a mate, how could I leave him? But even worse would be to stay, and drag him into our troubles with Amber."

Carolan nodded soberly, and there was a little silence.

They were climbing a flight of stairs, with no one else in sight. Morwena looked sidelong at Carolan. "It's a problem for you, too, isn't it? I saw you looking at Lady Winized. She — she's a very lovely lady, but...oh, Carolan, be careful. You could really break her heart."

Carolan frowned and nodded. They were both silent for the rest of the trip.

In a formal dining room, the Amberites had lunch with the King, Winized and Asolph, and several of the high nobles. They spoke much of fealty, of double allegiances, and various bits of personal history. Their hosts seemed a bit put off by Morgan's and Harlan's willingness to repudiate Amber, though Morgan insisted it was Random who had betrayed them. The talk went round and round. It reminded Morwena of the circling and sniffing of wolves getting to know each other. The meal ended without anything being really settled.

Later that afternoon, a page found Carolan and escorted him to the Lady Winized. She received him alone. He saw that she wore gold jewelry with her cream-colored gown, and that she nervously fingered a small, ruby-hilted dagger in a silver sheath.

"There is a way around our dilemma," she told him abruptly, when the page had gone. "It is not something I can promise easily, or assume. But there is an alternative to pledges of fealty. There are also...marriage

alliances."

"Such an alliance would not relieve me of my oath to Amber," said Carolan gently.

"I understand that. But you are the son of the King of Amber."

"Yes."

"Then, if we were married, there would be some sort of arrangement, I assume, between Greyfall and Amber."

Carolan hesitated. "I cannot arrange a State marriage for Amber. And yet...the marriage of any Amberite of high rank does create a relationship between the two realms. I've been banished, but not stripped of my citizenship. So, that should still be true."

Winized looked down at the table. "It would solve the problem, from Greyfall's point of view. If we were married, you would not have to swear fealty. It would be a marriage of equals, and no oath would be necessary, because you would be part of the family."

"Well, that's all very well and good for me, but what about Harlan? It doesn't solve his problem. It's not that I find you — in any way distasteful — but, well, it solves my problem, without solving the problem of my friend."

"The Council would still have to decide what course to take, in his case."

"Are you interested in a State marriage?"

"No. But, given time...you must excuse me. I've never had the opportunity to consider marriage with an equal. I find the thought exciting."

"Yes. I, too, have always been excited by the thought of — equals, but never had the opportunity to consider marriage, because equals were always family."

"Well, Carolan, if you will consider it, we can speak of it again presently. And meanwhile, you can remain here, under our protection."

"It would please me to be able to help you. Our marriage would give Greyfall legal status under Amber's law, and those who pursue me would be prohibited from attacking you."

"If I may point out another reason why we would move to this step...a personal reason...it is my opinion, and that of others, that you can be trusted, that you have been honest with us. The others are so light with their oaths that they would change...we find ourselves in the position of

having to accept them, but we would rather accept them with you here as well."

"Yes, I see."

"If nothing else, if the rest of you become part of our family, and accept the Greyfall, and side with us against Chaos, I'm sure that in time even Harlan, although he may not make an oath, will be acceptable."

"Perhaps such an arrangement would be best.... Yes, you can tell the Council that I will at least consider such an arrangement."

"Purely for State reasons?"

"I find you to be one of the truly beautiful women, and I certainly have been intrigued, as long as I can remember, by the idea of — equals."

They stayed together for a time, discussing lighter matters, finding they could take pleasure in each other's company.

After that, the family spent several days at Castle Greyfall, and Carolan spent most of his time with Lady Winized. They went riding together, sometimes on horses, sometimes together on Pegasus. The silver-grey sky was glorious as they soared above the castle.

In general, Winized seemed to give her deepest self to her work. She had never had any equals, except for her brothers. With anyone else there was a gulf, created by the fact that she could beat almost anyone at almost anything. So there had never been close friends for her. Amusements, she took as they came. She read widely, with no real areas of fascination. She rather liked flowers — no particular kinds. Her major form of exercise was weapons practice, followed by riding.

He asked her how big a family she wanted, and she shrugged. "Three seems like a nice number," she said. This, too, she seemed willing to take as it came.

"Have you ever been in love?" Carolan asked her.

Her cheeks flushed slightly. "Yes."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No." The denial was not angry, but it was final.

"But you believe in love?"

She smiled a little. "Oh, yes."

"In the romantic sense, or the chivalric, or both?"

"I'm not sure. I've never had a long-running romantic love. And as for chivalry, well — it's pretty silly for the knights to pledge themselves to defend me. After all, in battle I'll be the one out front, defending them. Which is as it should be. But, I — I really don't know whether the love I've felt so far has been more than...physical."

Carolan laughed ruefully. "Yeah," he said. "Welcome to the club." He changed the subject. "What is the highest form of duty, to you? Is your first loyalty to your family, or your King, or...?"

"Before you and your people came, everyone took for granted that the King took precedence, always. To us, King and family and Greyfall itself were one. Now, you are confusing the issue. I think, for me, it wouldn't be the Kingship as such, but my family or the Greyfall. Which, I don't know."

Carolan thought of serpents and apples. He changed the subject.

Much later in the evening, Carolan was contacted by Pegasus, *"I don't like being trapped here, not being able to come and go as I please. I am going to go and find my source of power in this place. I shouldn't be long."*

What could Carolan say to a friend but to take care.

In the morning, Carolan was heading to Winized's room, to see if she wanted to go down to breakfast. He heard a loud crash, like a heavy table full of objects being pushed over. He drew his sword and ran for her

door, which was ajar. He ran in.

Sure enough, the table had been knocked over. In a blur of motion, a werewolf-like creature flew across the room. Carolan heard it hit the wall.

"Winized!" Carolan called urgently, jumping into the room.

A dagger flashed across his field of view, pursuing the werewolf thing. But it missed, and hit the wall near the creature.

"Guards!" Winized shouted.

The werewolf was pushing its way behind a heavy bureau. Its claws seemed to be growing incredibly fast, even as it tried to move the furniture. Carolan charged, coming in from the side, trying to skewer it.

Meanwhile, Winized threw a chair with deadly aim. The chair bounced off the wall, and came down on the creature's head. She charged, swerving to attack from the side opposite Carolan.

Morgan ran in, hastily readying a spell.

The werewolf reared up, and heaved the huge, heavy old bureau at Winized. She ducked to one side and hit the bureau with the heel of her hand. The bureau smashed into the wall, shedding some pieces. Winized kept charging; so did Carolan; Morgan paused to release his spell.

The werewolf ducked to avoid Winized's dagger. This gave Carolan a good shot, and he impaled it. It screamed, and screamed again as he pulled out the blade with a vicious twist. The sword left a glowing wound in the creature.

Finding the neighborhood unhealthy, the werewolf leaped straight up and grabbed a pulley on the ceiling. Hanging there, it kicked out one of the windows.

Morgan's spell fired. It was his "heart-to-hand" spell, designed to grab the heart out of a being's chest, and pull it across the room to rest in Morgan's hand. There was a sucking, tearing sound, and Morgan was holding something red and dripping.

The werewolf didn't die easy. It continued to hang there, screaming, blood pouring out of its chest.

Winized paused, reached to one side, and grabbed the heavy bureau. As she readied to throw, Carolan threw a knife into the creature's throat.

Carolan didn't have much hope for this attack. The dagger wasn't even magical (unlike his sword). It was just a plain dagger with a silver

blade. Carolan was astonished when the werewolf fell, with the dagger through its throat, twitching and obviously dying to the floor. That dagger seemed to bother it more than having its heart torn out.

Morwena came running in with drawn sword. Seeing the creature thrashing on the floor, she made a long, shallow dive and grabbed its foot. She went for contact with its mind, but it faded out, and Morwena got to her feet, cursing.

Winized looked around at the others. "I see the attack is beginning," she said.

Carolan, jubilant with victory, cried out to Morgan, "That business in the movies about silver daggers and werewolves must be true! It dropped like a rock when that silver dagger hit it. It worked even better than a Sword of Destructive Force." He paused, and frowned. "Of course, my sword may not be working well, away from the Pattern. Maybe it was the silver inlays, and not the magic at all."

Morgan threw the creature's heart to the floor beside its body, without comment. There was no sign of the body catching fire, as many Chaos-bred creatures known in Amber would have done.

Suddenly, the room was full of guards, and Faustus ran in, too. Everyone milled around, looking at the dead creature.

"I tried to read its mind, but it was gone," Morwena told Faustus.

"Well, that's a first," said Faustus.

"Never had one in the castle before, huh?" Morwena guessed.

"Never had one try to attack us in our quarters before like this," he answered grimly.

"Did you know they're vulnerable to silver?" Carolan put in.

Faustus looked thoughtful. "I guess we do now."

"Wouldn't hurt to start arming with silver-edged weapons," said Carolan.

"Yeah," Faustus agreed.

"Interesting."

"The thing woke me up," said Winized. "It was leaning over me, with its paw reaching for my throat, when I woke up. It's a lucky thing I was aware of it. I could feel its malevolence — brought me right out of a sound sleep."

Some showed it more than others, but each in his or her way was shaken by the incident. There was a new awareness of how serious the war with Chaos could become at any time.

Later that evening Rudra snuck out to use his untraceable new powers to investigate the nature of Greyfalls enemies.

Finally, on the fifth day of their acquaintance, Carolan braced himself to tell Winized certain private things. He waited until they were alone, one early evening after a pleasant dinner.

"Winized," he said quietly, "before our relationship can go much farther, there are things about me you need to know."

"Like what?" she asked, looking at him soberly.

"Like, things about why I, in particular, was banished — as opposed to Morgan, who did a very nice job of glossing over several of the details."

Winized gave him her full attention. "So, what have you done?"

Carolan took a deep breath. "It's probably better if I go back and start at the beginning. The Dragon ate Amber, and some of us, fortunately, were not there when it happened. Everyone who was there was trapped, including most of my aunts and uncles. But some of us younger types were free to try to solve the problem. So we went through various machinations to try and restore Amber. And it got to be a very long story, and one of the things that happened was that my uncle Caine turned out to be free, and did certain things that I interpreted as trying to betray me."

"You view him as a great menace?"

"Adversary may be a better word."

"There is a difference?"

"Yes. I don't personally feel that Caine would ever kill me, the way Deirdre wants to kill Morgan. Caine would prefer to make me miserable for eternity."

Winized looked puzzled. "What kind of person...?"

Carolan shrugged. "Feeling that way about me, my existence is

important to him, in a way. That's why I use the word adversary. Caine uses everyone as chess pieces. I know you have a hard time dealing with that idea, but everything is a game to Caine. As part of his game, I've become more than just a piece...I might be the board he's playing on. Something very basic to him."

"What did you do to him?"

"I cut off his hand. You see, when I was growing up, my uncles and aunts, but especially my uncles, always led me to believe that I was their inferior. If he and my other uncles had not wished to deceive me into thinking there was no way I could match them physically, mentally, or magically, I probably wouldn't have dealt with him as harshly as I did. But we were in a situation where I perceived that I was fighting for my life against Caine, who seemed to me a foe far more powerful than I. We were faced off, and he was materializing some kind of dagger to attack me. And I felt that I had just moments to do something, so I cut off his hand that held the dagger. In fact, as I found out later, I might have parried his blows. But I didn't think I could. But I also learned the dagger wasn't just a dagger, but a weapon of psychic destruction. So, perhaps it's best that I did what I did."

Carolan paused, and sighed. "So that's why Caine is my enemy. But it doesn't explain why I was banished from Amber."

Winized started. "I don't understand. You were fighting? You were in the midst of combat?"

"Yes."

"Why would this person hold a grudge against you?"

Carolan smiled sourly. "Because it's one of the things he does best."

"But, the fact that you bested him in combat caused him to play you as a gaming piece?"

"Yes. You see, in Amber, when you best someone, they don't say, 'Oh, that's nice, you're better than me.' They say, 'I'll get you for that. I'll make you sorry you embarrassed me, that you defeated me.'"

"They have enormous egos?"

"Yes. They have enormous egos. I don't want to say they're without honor, because they're not, but — they have lived, some of them, for so long, and in so many realities, that they have come to feel that nothing is

important except how they interact with each other. And they spend a lot of time trying to prove to each other who's the best. And if you can establish, especially in front of other members of the family, that you're better than someone else, then you have taken away status, or as one different culture I have encountered would say, face, from that person, and you've lifted yourself a step higher in the pecking order."

"Do you feel that way?"

"I feel that the whole thing is silly, and not important. But I'm a freak in my family."

"So, Caine pursues you simply to avenge this slight against him?"

"That, and because he doesn't have anything better to do with his life."

"But, if it was fair combat, why would you be banished?"

"I wasn't banished for that. I was merely punished for that — like being sent to my room without my supper."

"But why?"

"Because Caine protested that I had done him a wrong."

"Had you done him a wrong?"

"I suppose it all depends on your point of view."

"But he attacked you, so you say."

"He, of course, claimed that he wasn't attacking me."

"Was he attacking you?"

"As I perceived it, yes."

"In retrospect, do you still believe that?"

"Yes, I do."

"Had you given him some kind of cause?"

"Yes, probably, in his mind." He went on to tell Winized the story of how the Pattern was coming apart, needing to be restored. Caine had come to the scene of the action, along with some other people. Some of them, Carolan had trusted, but he hadn't trusted Caine. He had felt it better to take Caine away from there.

"So in other words, you interfered with some good thing he was doing?"

"So he claimed, yes."

"But if you were punished, that means others believed that."

"Not necessarily. But it's quite possible, yes. In Amber, punishment has very little to do with justice. It has to do with pecking order and power."

"So, you believe that, if you had not stopped him, Caine would have done some great evil?"

"At the time, I firmly believed that. To be honest, I can't be absolutely sure. Maybe the worst he was guilty of was wanting to look like a hero, which is something he's always been good at."

Winized seemed to consider for several moments, then moved to another point. "So, what is the real reason you were banished?"

"The reason I was banished.... The story goes on. Caine decided that the way I could redeem myself for the offense I'd committed against his person was by going on a mission for him. So he arranged to send me to the Land of the Dead, to find a family member, Lord Corwin."

Winized had never heard of the Land of the Dead. So Carolan spent some time describing the place, and some of its horrors. Winized was astonished.

"And you say Caine sent you there?"

"Yes. I think it was a Trump gate, but I'm not sure."

"So you performed this mission, as Caine required. But that was not sufficient to square whatever matter of honor Caine felt was between you?"

"He said, at the time, that it would be sufficient. Obviously, he changed his mind afterwards, or lied, or...maybe, in his mind, that score is even, and what he's doing now is just what Caine does to people. It's hard for me to tell the difference. It's not a lot easier for me to understand Caine than it is for you, because I don't think the way he thinks. I don't think the way most of my family think. I see their actions, and I try to react as best I can."

"How would you describe the way Caine thinks?"

Carolan paused, trying to formulate his thoughts. "Caine...plays chess, with people. That's the best way I can describe it. And, since I don't understand chess very well, it's obvious I don't understand Caine very well."

Winized nodded. "But, you were banished."

"Yes. Well...there was a gathering of most of the family in one place. And this, generally speaking, is not a good thing in Amber, because

there are people in the family who are bitter enemies. One of these people was Thanos, Morgan's brother, and his enemy, because only one of them could inherit the power of their father. Why either one of them would want the power of their father, who was the insane betrayer of Amber, I have no idea. But they apparently both of them want it, and only one can have it."

"So your family gathered together. And then what happened?" Winized asked.

"I was contacted by one of my aunts, Llewella. She was Thanos's mother. She contacted me using my Trump, and asked me to join her and her sons against those who would destroy my father. The inference being that Caine and certain others were out to get my father, Random, who is now the King of Amber. But, when I was in the Land of the Dead, I had met Brand, and Brand had said that he was my father. And it occurred to me that I looked nothing like Random, but I look an awful lot like Brand. I do not like to consider the idea that Brand could be my father...the thought of Brand with my mother is...but one never knows, among my family. My mother may not even be my mother. When you get into that kind of speculation, therein lies madness, because it's so hard to decide what's real.

"Anyway, I said to Llewella that enemies could not harm my father, because my father was already dead, referring to Brand. And at that point Thanos broke in. Now, Thanos at that time was the most powerful psychic mind in Amber to my knowledge, and he had all of Brand's devices and powers because he controlled Brand's fortress. And he started screaming from nowhere, because he hadn't been part of the Trump contact — which I presume is similar to contact through your tuning forks. And Thanos screamed that they should kill me, because I was Brand's mystery third son. And suddenly Thanos was there in front of me, screaming for my blood. And my mind seemed to be falling under his control. And, once again, I was in a situation where I perceived my life to be nearly over. So, because Thanos was my superior mentally and magically, I thought the only thing to do was to attack him physically, which I proceeded to do."

Carolan's voice had begun to shake, and it was very hard for him to go on.

"So, you were banished for attacking Thanos?" Winized asked gently.

Carolan pulled himself together. "I was told at my trial that, if I had attacked Thanos, I would have been banished. The person who eventually killed Thanos was banished. But — but that wasn't what happened, in my case. I...I struck at Thanos. I thrust my sword into his brain, and killed him. Or so I thought. But, in fact —" Here Carolan's voice broke, and he choked out, "In fact, the one I stabbed was — my Aunt Llewella."

"But why?" Winized asked. "Why did you kill her?"

"I had no idea it was Llewella," Carolan said. He was weeping now, without shame. "I never would have killed her. I loved her. I still to this day don't understand how Thanos was present. It had something to do with his manipulation of the Trump contact. He superimposed his image over hers, or something. But there's no doubt. I aimed my blow at Thanos, but it was Llewella I killed."

Winized had tears in her eyes. She placed her hand gently over Carolan's, and simply let him weep until he could stop.

"And you say Thanos had controlled your mind?" she asked finally.

Carolan nodded. "That probably had something to do with why I attacked someone other than him."

"But, if he controlled your mind, why were you able to attack at all?"

"That's a very good question. I tried, at my trial, to convince the others that we were being manipulated by an outside force. I became certain of this later: I discovered Harlan's crime was that, when Morgan killed Damien, Harlan knew the situation was being manipulated by an outside force: the energy rifle that Morgan had received in Shadow had been modified by someone to work over the Pattern. And Harlan let it happen, therefore he was deemed to be as guilty of Damien's murder as Morgan. That's why Harlan was banished."

"But, you feel you were controlled by Thanos. I don't understand — would Thanos force you to kill his mother?"

"One would not think so. Certainly Solem, who hunts me now for his mother's death, does not think so. But Thanos was not exactly sane. In that way, he was very much his father's son. Perhaps it was part of his plan. He did, however, seem horrified by the event when it happened."

"So, do you feel yourself to be at fault?"

Carolan sighed. "One is always responsible for one's actions."

"You have been justifiably banished, then?"

Carolan looked at her bleakly, his face set in lines of self-blame. "I don't object to my banishment," he said. "My only objection is, that all the effort that has gone into hunting us weakens Amber. And there are still enemies out there. There's that unseen force that's manipulating our actions. People should be concentrating on that, and not on trying to kill us. I was willing to accept whatever punishment my elders decided I deserved, because, yes, I guess I'm guilty."

Winized stood up suddenly. Carolan, fearing she was about to leave, felt he had to make clear one last thing.

"The other thing you should know," he said, "is that I killed her with Grayswandir, a sword of power. There was a slim chance — perhaps a million to one chance — that if I'd let go of the sword while it was still inside her brain, perhaps something could have been done to save her. By then, I could see it was Llewella I had struck, and I would willingly have given my own life to save her. But, in our world, there are a few items of great power, and it had been established that Grayswandir was one of these. And I felt that I could not leave the sword with Thanos. So — I pulled it out."

Winized stood, staring down at Carolan sadly. There was a long moment of silence. Winized laid her hand gently on Carolan's head.

"Thank you for letting me tell this to you," Carolan said, in a soft, hoarse voice full of tears. "I've never been able to tell anyone this story before."

"I go to light a candle for Llewella," said Winized. "I will think of this."

Carolan heard Winized's footsteps move away from him, toward the door.

"She forgave me," Carolan whispered without raising his head. "At least, in a vision I had of her, later."

Winized's footsteps paused. "And is that enough for you?"

"It — helps."

"But is it enough?"

"No," he whispered.

Winized's footsteps resumed. The door opened, and then closed, and Carolan was left alone.

Carolan kept to himself for the rest of the day. Then, in the early evening, he asked Winized to go for a walk in the garden, and she agreed.

"Have you had time to think about...what we discussed?" he asked her. "I mean, why I was banished, and so forth?"

Winized nodded gravely. She was very lovely, seen as a shadow against the fading silver of the sky.

"Have you come to any conclusion?"

"I've come to the conclusion that it is part of your life, something which happened before you came here. It's a problem you must deal with, and resolve in your own mind. But it cannot interfere with any life we may make together."

"And you don't think that anything that's happened in your past will interfere with the life we might make together?"

"No."

"Where do we go from here? Do we wait?"

"If you wish."

"What do you wish? I mean, this is a two-way street. It's going to be a partnership."

"I feel that it is a matter of what we are waiting for. If we are waiting for the approval of Morgan and yourself and Harlan and Morwena and Rudra to be allowed to descend the Greyfall, then there may be a long waiting period. However, if you and I come to an arrangement...."

"It may shorten the waiting period."

"Yes. It would eliminate the waiting period, because that would be the arrangement. The question is, is this what you really want, Carolan?"

"Are — are you really sure that you want this, Winized?"

"I do. Do you?"

For all his proven bravery in the face of various dangers, Carolan

found himself unable to answer a word. They walked in the garden for a while. Finally, quite gently, Winized led him back to the castle.

After breakfast next morning, Carolan once again asked Winized to walk in the garden.

When they had walked for awhile, she asked, "You seem to be very quiet. Is something troubling you?"

"No, not really. I think I just put a few ghosts to bed."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Yeah, maybe I should talk about it a little bit. But maybe not, because I've made up my mind, so I guess...."

There was a pause. Finally, Carolan reached out and caressed Winized's cheek. "I think I could grow to love you, too," he said.

She took his hand, and kissed the palm. She looked up at him steadily. He

gathered her into his arms and tried to kiss her. But she buried her face in his shoulder.

She was shaking. Not crying, not laughing. Just shaking.

"Winized, what's the matter?" he asked.

"I — I've never had to be so uncertain," said whispered. "I've never been in a position where I've had so little control."

"Me, too," he answered softly. "Whenever I've held a woman like this before, I've always known exactly what she wanted. Because I wanted her to want it."

"And I've always known where it was going."

"Do you...do you like...not feeling you have control of the situation?"

"No. Yes. I don't know."

"Well, now you're beginning to sound like a woman I could love," said Carolan, trying to laugh about it all. Then he sobered. "So. What happens next?"

Winized turned away, and put her hands over her face. She was still shaking. After a minute, Carolan put his arm around her, but she moved away.

He waited another minute. "You and the Greyfall are everything I've ever wanted," he said finally. "And sometimes, finding your dreams is...."

With her back still turned, Winized held up one hand. "No," she said. "I can't go through with this. This is as far as I can take it."

Her voice had started to change. It was not her voice anymore. Yet Carolan knew the voice. And when she...he...turned around, Carolan knew the face.

It was Caine.

Carolan watched, with a face that didn't move, or change with time in any way. Caine watched his face, and, oddly, his wasn't smiling.

"Carolan, I'm really sorry," said Caine, finally "I went a little too far with this."

"Yeah, I guess you did," said Carolan's voice, from the face that still didn't change at all. "So what's really going on here?"

"What's really going on, is that you and Morgan — the whole lot

of you — were looking for a place where none of the others could find you. So I made a place where none of the others could find you."

"No wonder it seemed to be more a place that I would like than Rudra."

"Well, that was the idea."

"So none of this is real?"

"Oh, it's real enough. And there is a Winized. You wouldn't like her much."

Carolan nodded.

"And Carolan...this just isn't the place you think it is."

"Well, I hope you're happy," said Carolan, his face changing a little at last. "You managed to take away something really important to me."

Caine relaxed a little. "Well, yes and no, Carolan. The fact of the matter is, you really didn't know what you wanted, did you?"

"No, I guess I didn't."

"And the other fact of the matter is, that it was entirely too easy to fool you into thinking all of this was something you really wanted. Real life's not like that." He sighed. "Well, in any case, I've heard all I need to. And, for what it's worth, our troubles are over."

"Really?"

Caine held out his right hand. He'd grown it again, it seemed.

Carolan shook hands with him.

"You did good," said Caine. "You did real good. I'll get Julian, and Derek who never could play-act worth a damn...I'm surprise he managed to fool you."

"Derek?"

"Asolph."

"Asolph was Derek?"

"Yeah."

Both of them laughed a little.

"So this just ends our personal troubles, yours and mine. We're still banished?"

"Well, let's go talk to the others."

"Sure."

Morgan and Morwena were in the armory, working, when Carolan walked in, with Caine.

Morgan looked up, and froze in shock. This lasted less than a heartbeat, however. And all Morgan said was, "Hi, Caine."

"I'd like you to meet...the Lady Winized," said Carolan.

"Charmed," said Morgan flatly. "Does this settle your score with Carolan?"

"Yup. It's over." Caine waved his regenerated right hand. "I never have believed Carolan was...so friggin' innocent. But he convinced me."

"What about Deirdre and Corwin?" Morwena spoke up, without expression. "Are they here? Does this deal include them?"

"No," said Caine. "But if you wish to stay here, this is the perfect sanctuary from any of the others. Otherwise, you wouldn't have found it by looking for the perfect hiding place. Keep it. Stay as long as you want."

Julian came in, muttered something in Caine's ear, and hurried out again.

"Well, it's time for me to go," Caine announced. "Take care of yourself, Carolan." He took Carolan by the shoulder, and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. Carolan's hands clenched, but he made no other move.

Then, as if remembering something, Caine suddenly turned to Morwena. "Morwena, I have not spoken with you."

Throughout the conversation, Morwena had not moved or changed expression. Nor did she do so now. "Keep it that way," she said, very quietly.

"I must tell you that, if you wish, you may return to Amber with me."

"How am I so honored?" she asked, in a voice made of cutting shards of ice.

"You are not guilty of any of these crimes," Caine answered simply.

"I wouldn't cross the street with you. Leave me alone."

Caine returned her gaze calmly. "Well, Morwena, someday we may be friends."

One corner of her mouth twisted, just a fraction, but she didn't speak.

"One more thing," said Morgan. "Where are the rightful rulers of Greyfall?"

"That is what Julian just told me," said Caine. "They have been released. And I am afraid that I have to run. Farewell." And he left.

Morwena stared after him. Carolan moved over to her, and said softly, "I think you're making a very big mistake. Don't make him into more of a villain than he is."

Morwena shrugged. "I just don't want to have anything to do with him."

"Just...don't let your hate blind you. I know it won't do any good, but I just feel obliged to tell you."

She smiled bitterly, and shook her head. "If you think I'm going to become his sworn enemy, you're wrong. Making a fool of someone is not a capital crime, but I just don't want to be around him. All right?"

"Okay."

The group decided that what they'd better do was to find the Greyfall and walk it. Despite a developing search for them, they found their way down into the caverns under the Castle. And there, they met Winized, Faustus, and Asolph.

"You don't know her," Morgan hissed, panting.

"I know," Carolan hissed back. But he just stood staring at her.

"She just looks like someone you know, and were in love with," Morgan pursued.

"I was never in love with her," Carolan protested.

Carolan looked Winized in the eye. "We're here to descend the Greyfall. Step aside. I'd rather do it as your ally than your enemy."

"Who are you?" demanded Faustus. "You're not the ones who imprisoned us."

"No, we aren't," said Morgan quickly.

"No, we're not, and we're not your enemies," confirmed Carolan.

"Do you know why they imprisoned you?" asked Morwena bitterly.

"So they could play a trick on us."

"What?" asked Faustus.

"They were our enemies," said Morgan.

"So none of you were responsible for our imprisonment," said Faustus.

The party showered him with disclaimers.

Faustus put one hand to his forehead. "I sense that what you say is the truth. But, why should we let you descend the Greyfall?"

"Because...we need a place to stay for awhile, where our other enemies won't find us, and this is that place," Carolan offered.

Faustus shook his head sharply. "Why should we let you stay? This is our land."

"It's true," Carolan agreed. "But, once we've descended the Greyfall, we can be of great help to you against the forces of Chaos."

Faustus narrowed his eyes. "Why should we turn against our allies?"

"The Lords of Chaos are your allies?" Carolan asked blankly.

"Of course," said Faustus.

Carolan had to grope for words. "That's...not the story we heard. But we heard...many things, so...."

"Well, when Julian was wearing your body, he told us the forces of Chaos were your enemies," Morwena clarified.

Freshly empowere, Pegasus, returning from his qest, came flying down the cavern, and landed next to Carolan. *"You're in trouble,"* he thought crisply to Carolan. *"Something's coming from Chaos, and whatever it is, it's mad."*

"Something's coming from Chaos, and it's angry," Carolan told Faustus. "Are you sure they're your allies?"

"Yes," said Faustus.

"I suspect our enemies have made enemies of your allies," said Morwena.

"Can you get us out of here?" Carolan thought quickly to Pegasus.

"Sure."

"You want me to shoot them?" hissed Morgan in Carolan's ear. "If not, get them out of my way."

"Jesus Christ, and what? Take the place over?" Carolan hissed

back. "No! I don't want them dead."

"I want to walk the Greyfall," Morgan whispered fiercely. "Even if they have to die. Either you can figure a way to save their asses, or they're gonna die."

"Okay. No problem," said Carolan. *"Go!"* he thought to Pegasus. *"Get us the hell out of here."*

And so against Morgan's desires, the cavern and the royal family of Greyfall faded away as Pegasus gathered the outlaws of Amber under his power and transported them away to their next hoped-for place of sanctuary.

Cathy Klessig:

Cathy is really just an overgrown kid, who never got tired of playing princess. From a rhinestone tiara at the age of eight, to AD&D, to White Wolf, to Amber, was really just the natural progression, like finding her way to the center of things.

Michael Kucharski:

Being one of the original twenty-one playtesters of the ADRPG system, I was also among the first to do character sketches/trumps as a player contribution. Many of those contributions were later redone as finished pen & ink drawings for Amberzine, along with other new illustrations for each printed episode of the trials and tribulations of Morgan and Co. in Erick Wujcik's Wolfing Campaign. The Royal Family of Greyfall on pages 460-461 is one of the latter, having been commissioned by Erick and done (from my somewhat fresher memory of the game at the time) for *Amberzine* nine years ago. Not a great piece but it is still nice to see it finally get printed. Thank you, Cathy and Erick.

The Seeker in the Depths

By Melissa "M'liss" Garber
based on pre-gaming for Scott Acker's one-shot
The Thing Beneath

My name is Igraine. This is the least important thing about me, but it is always the first thing people want to know. Once I understood this and even shared it, but no longer.

I am an archivist here in Castle Amber. This *does* matter. I am no longer allowed to enter the Lower Archive beneath the castle, and now we are at the heart of it. But first things first.

You know—if you have found this you *must* know about the Garnath problem. For some years the influx of alien beasts had been rising almost steadily. Then, quite suddenly, their numbers doubled or even trebled. The very slopes of Kolvir became unsafe; and as for the valley of Garnath, staid and sober men whispered fearfully of the shapes that moved beneath its trees, which though still alive had become dark and unwholesome.

You must know this, and surely you must also know that our royal protectors did not let such occurrences go unchallenged. They took the obvious measure of sending soldiers against the intruders, ever more numerous and ever more alien. They also desired knowledge of what these things must be, and to that end we archivists found ourselves engaged in a search both wider in scope and more thorough in detail than any in our library's history. From the head archivist to the most junior shelver, and even scribes and royals' private secretaries when they could be spared: nearly every literate soul in castle and city scoured the shelves for any clue as to the nature of our attackers and thus to the means of their defeat, or at least

expulsion.

I was assigned to the Lower Archive, or more accurately, I was one of those willing to work there. Many of the junior staff and nearly all the outsiders feared the place: merely superstitious dread of its location in the depths of Kolvir, far from the comforting sun, and of the dim and echoing caverns. Would that I had shared—but I outpace myself again.

One of the rumors out of Garnath was that a group of soldiers had been captured by, and one rescued from, a band of things that *became other things*. It was for a reference to any such malleable creature that I was searching, one chill night in the time just before spring. The cold and the late hour had driven my fellow researchers to their beds or at least to the Main Archive with its fireplace, but I had come across a passage that seemed relevant. All life was malleable, it said, with differences only in degree; and as authority it cited a text with which I was unfamiliar. This text seemed unlikely to have been neglected by those who had stocked our shelves, and I was determined to find it before retiring.

I did find it at last, but my searching was not yet ended. For this text spoke, in a fashion somehow both reverent and fearful, of a manuscript unimaginably old—older than Amber itself—and holding knowledge which younger ages had forgotten. Its title was *Concerning the Rites of the Worm*—or perhaps *Dragon*, or even *Snake*: the word used was an archaism and could name any long sinuous creature. Whichever it was, now I had an idea where to find the manuscript; and surely this time I would also find the information I sought.

Any work about *rites* must be in the deepest recesses of this very chamber, I thought, and so it turned out to be. Still it took me some time to recognize it, for the title in my reference—archaic though it was—was a translation. The actual title was in an ancient form of Thari, no longer known to any but royals ... and archivists. I blew the dust from the volume and opened the cracking lather cover.

I had not seen this language in a long time, and in the beginning it was slow going. But soon I had to pause only occasionally to work out a difficult passage. The book itself drew me on, drew me in, as I realized that here was the answer at last. It began with an account of the beginning of the world—an account far different from the story told in Amber, and I shuddered

at some of the details. It moved on through endless eons and endless spaces, showing me vast histories of unspeakably alien beings. Some of the lesser of these had been sighted in Garnath, but I was no longer thinking of Garnath. Next to the terrifying history unfolding before me, the Garnath problem—Amber itself—seemed insignificant. Assuredly, all the might of the kingdom could not stand before such creatures as these I read about—a few described outright, more shown glancingly through hints and repellent metaphors.

From what followed, I know that I must have recited one of these descriptions. I have no memory of doing so—but what archivist has not been startled, at least once, by the sound of another unknowingly giving voice to a thorny line? I do not doubt I spoke the lines aloud, for the last few lines of what I read should have rhymed but did not seem to, and I wondered why a description in rhymed verse would end so. I do not doubt I spoke—I must have spoken—because in one heartbeat I suddenly knew how the line should sound, and in the next I was no longer alone in my thoughts.

I felt it more than saw it, though see it I did. I knew that *something*, at an unimaginable distance, had become aware of me and was watching me through a thousand things that might be eyes. I knew that the thing itself was one and yet a horde, all at once. I knew that it was hungry, always hungry, and that because I had drawn its gaze it now hungered for *me*. Immobile in its distant home, yet it was hurtling toward me, this unfathomable terror.

Unfathomable? No. As it neared I realized I knew it. It was what the verse described—those lines that, properly spoken in the old tongue, made such a twisted, a discordant, a foul rhyme:

In all the worlds, two things only are eternal:
There is prey, and there is that which seeks prey.

An archivist, by nature, hunts. I had spent my days finding what others wanted: a half-remembered passage; a legal precedent; an afternoon's light reading; or, as now, the solution to some pressing problem of the realm. To the thing now slithering, flopping, diving, striding through nowhere spaces toward me, I was not only prey. I was kindred.

And that was worst of all.

I was told, when some portion of reason had returned to me, that the next morning's team of archivists had found me curled on the floor in the dark, the book and my shattered lamp beside me, my voice gone, though still I tried to scream. Much later I persuaded one of them to admit the rest: that there had been a suggestion of movement in the shadows before their lamps brought me fully into view, and that on and around me had been a trail of foul-smelling slime such as a snail might leave, but *encircling* me about the waist, even where I rested on the stone floor. My informant would not speculate, but I have no doubt that I was caught in the grip of some inhuman limb, held fast until enough of that which seeks prey had arrived for it to feed. I am sure it was only the sudden light that saved me.

Access to the Lower Archive is now restricted: only the head archivist and of course the royals may enter. The guards have strict orders to admit no one else, least of all myself. This is unprecedented and has caused much grumbling among the other archivists. But from me, at least, the guards need fear nothing. Not for any price would I again set foot in that benighted chamber or touch the accursed book. I have even asked, and begged when asking failed, for the room to be sealed or its contents burned. To no avail. I cannot make them listen, not even the royals with their special knowledge of things strange and terrible. Instead there is talk of a dropped lamp and a morbid fear of the dark, and they do not listen. They look at me with pity and with what they think is understanding, but they do not *listen* and so we are doomed.

I have touched that which seeks prey. I share something of its essence; and it saw me, and it hungers. Someday it will come for me, and find us all; and then the castle will echo with our screams.

Shadow Knight

I was first introduced to Ken Alves's artwork by Erick in 1991, when I came by to drop off illustrations for the *Amber Diceless Role-Playing* gamebook. He was one of three artists who had recently contacted Phage Press, and Erick was excited with the possibility of using Ken on some Amber project in the future. Later, I shared with him the art assignment on the second Phage Press gamebook, *Shadow Knight*, and later again we both worked on the unpublished Rebma, along with a couple of other artists. Ken's *Amberzine* comic strip, also called *Shadow Knight*, appeared in the first Amberzine, and has only been absent from one issue, *Amberzine* #11.

Here in Phage Press's final issue of *Amberzine*, Erick Wujcik presents the conclusion of *Shadow Knight*. For my part, I apologize to Ken and his fans for the size at which the pages are reproduced; originally, 36 pages had been reserved for Ken's strip, but he felt the story's conclusion couldn't be condensed into anything less than 43 pages. So to fit the forty-three pages within the space left, I have taken a little creative license in their presentation.

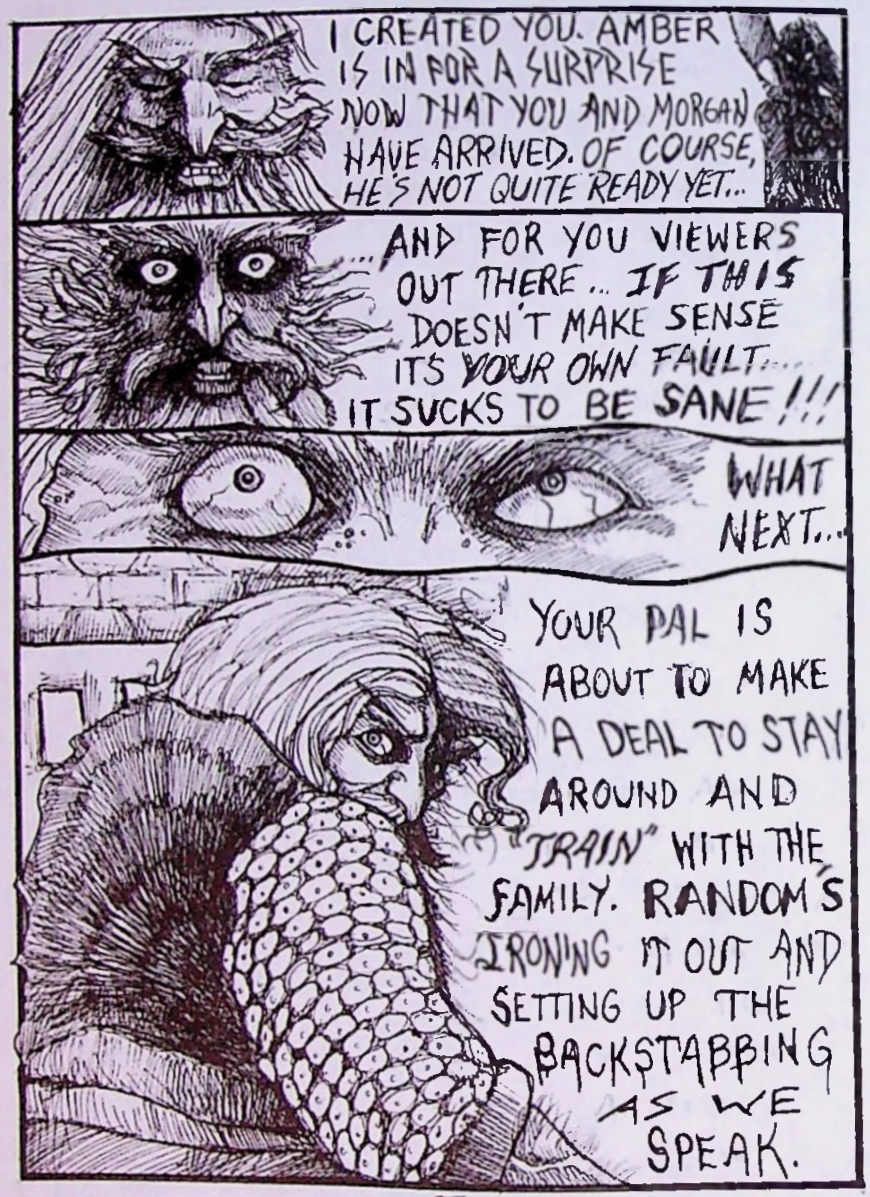
I hope that everyone is pleased with the quality of the reproduction of the comic strip. Years ago, cartoonists would do their preliminary drawings with a non-photo blue pencil. These lines would then be redrawn with a regular lead pencil and inked with Indian ink. The lead pencil lines could be erased and the non-photo blue pencil lines, although impossible to erase, would not register when the artwork was photographed for reproduction. Unfortunately the scanning process does not filter out non-photo blue pencil lines. As I have access to a scanner that could accommodate the size of his artwork, Ken had me scan the pages and clean them up for presentation, using PhotoShop. Again, I hope I have done well by Ken. I have tried to insure that all artwork in this *Amberzine* is not only the best the artists could do, but is published with equal care and effort.

I... AM A CONTINGENCY MEASURE OF YOURS?

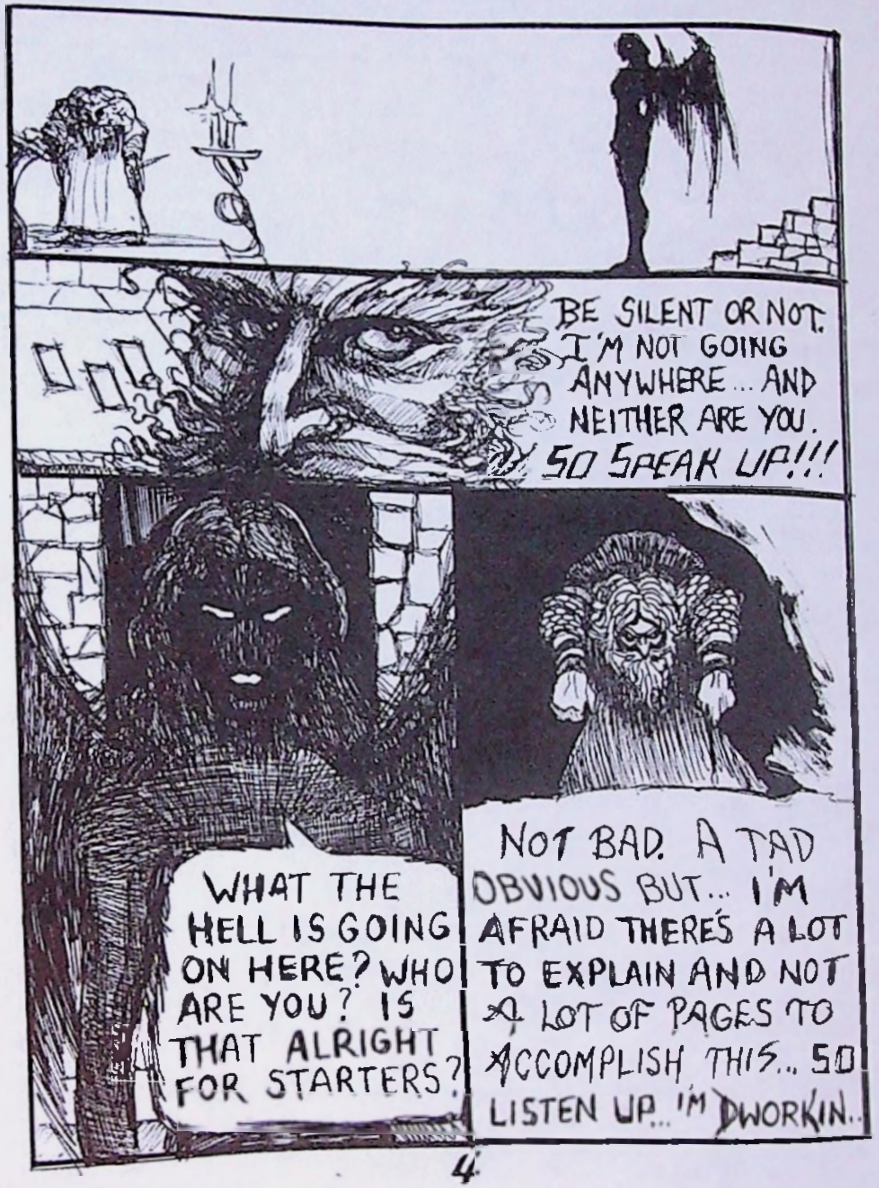
2

THAT YOU ARE, MY DEAR..... AND YOU SHOULD COUNT YOURSELF FORTUNATE FOR THAT....
UNLIKE THE WAY MY SON HAD FOR CREATING HIS LITTLE "CONTINGENCIES," I OVERSAW ALL PARTS OF YOUR CREATION!
DARK

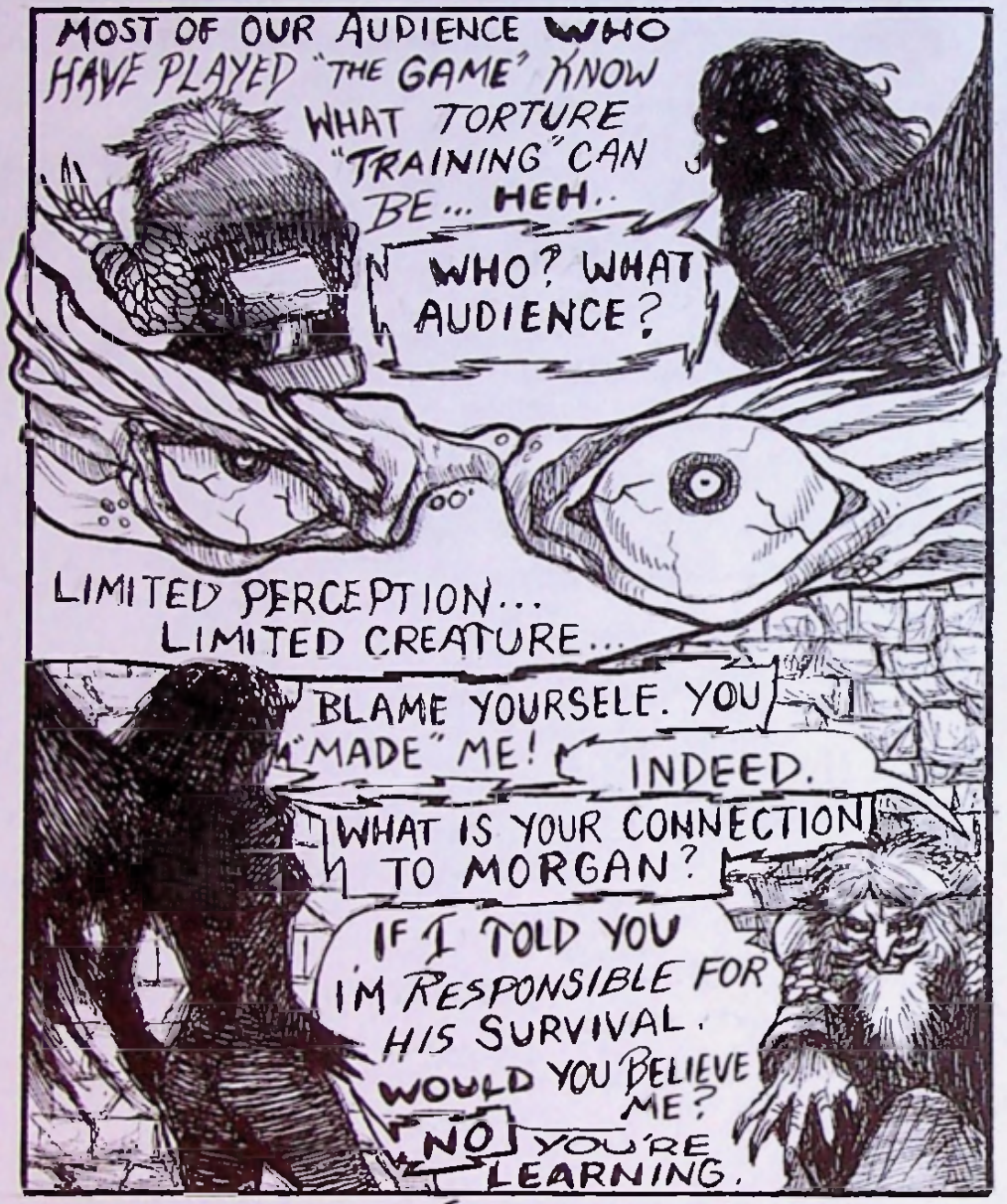
3

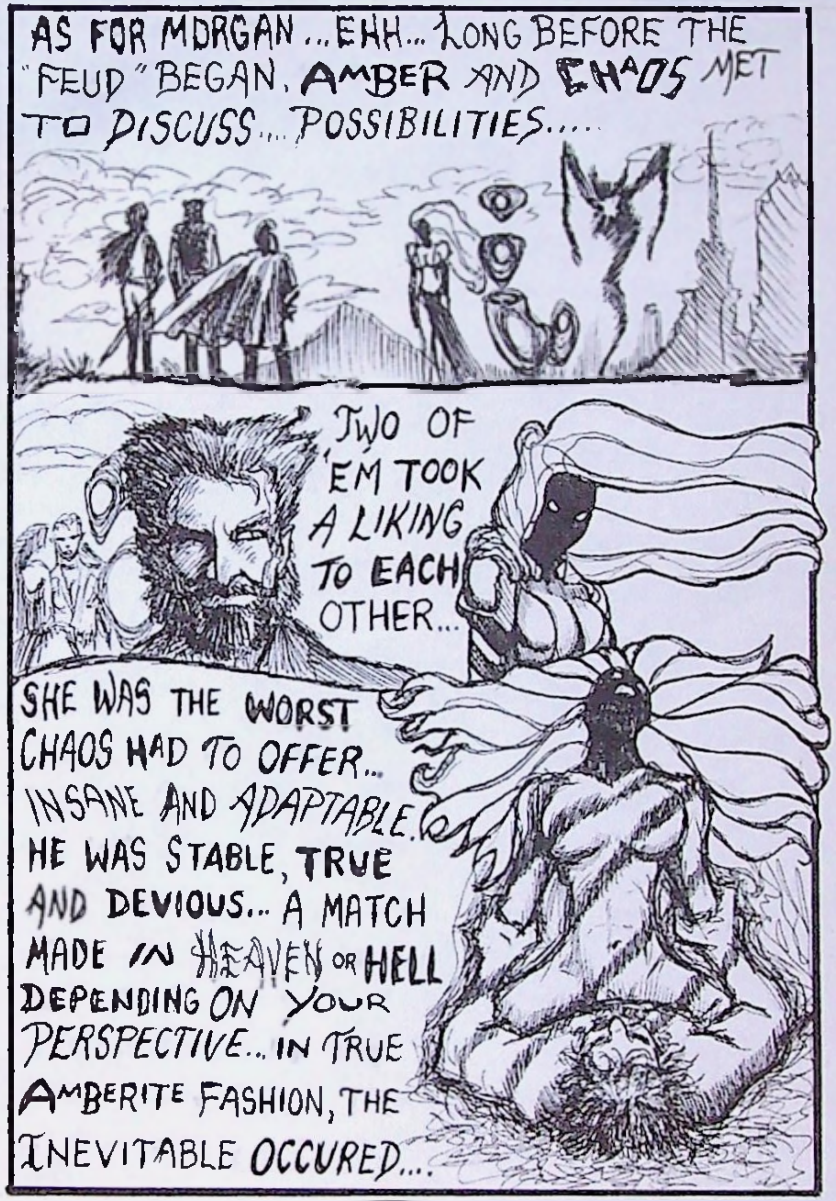

I CREATED YOU. AMBER IS IN FOR A SURPRISE NOW THAT YOU AND MORGAN HAVE ARRIVED. OF COURSE, HE'S NOT QUITE READY YET..
...AND FOR YOU VIEWERS OUT THERE... IF THIS DOESN'T MAKE SENSE IT'S YOUR OWN FAULT.... IT SUCKS TO BE SANE!!!
WHAT NEXT...
YOUR PAL IS ABOUT TO MAKE A DEAL TO STAY AROUND AND "TRAIN" WITH THE FAMILY. RANDOM'S IRONING IT OUT AND SETTING UP THE BACKSTABBING AS WE SPEAK.

5


BE SILENT OR NOT. I'M NOT GOING ANYWHERE... AND NEITHER ARE YOU. SO SPEAK UP!!!
WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE? WHO ARE YOU? IS THAT ALRIGHT FOR STARTERS?
NOT BAD. A TAD OBVIOUS BUT... I'M AFRAID THERE'S A LOT TO EXPLAIN AND NOT A LOT OF PAGES TO ACCOMPLISH THIS... SO LISTEN UP... I'M DWORKIN..

4


MOST OF OUR AUDIENCE WHO HAVE PLAYED "THE GAME" KNOW WHAT TORTURE "TRAINING" CAN BE... HEH..
WHO? WHAT AUDIENCE?
LIMITED PERCEPTION... LIMITED CREATURE...
BLAME YOURSELF. YOU "MADE" ME!
INDEED.
WHAT IS YOUR CONNECTION TO MORGAN?
IF I TOLD YOU I'M RESPONSIBLE FOR HIS SURVIVAL. WOULD YOU BELIEVE ME?
NO YOU'RE LEARNING.

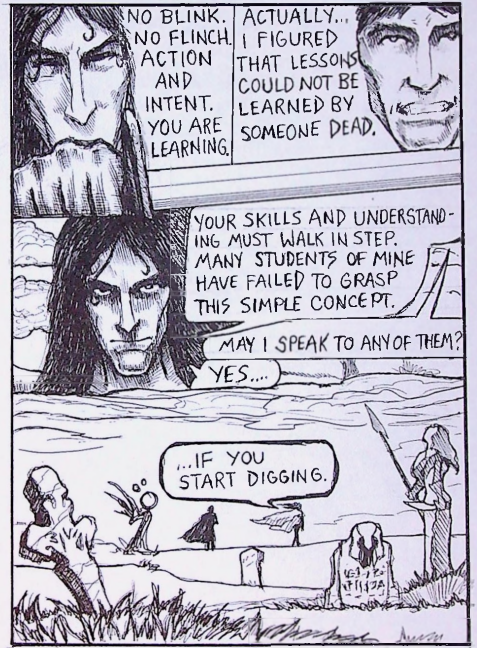

AS FOR MORGAN... EHH... LONG BEFORE THE "FEUD" BEGAN, AMBER AND CHAOS MET TO DISCUSS... POSSIBILITIES.....
TWO OF 'EM TOOK A LIKING TO EACH OTHER...
SHE WAS THE WORST CHAOS HAD TO OFFER... INSANE AND ADAPTABLE. HE WAS STABLE, TRUE AND DEVIOUS... A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN OR HELL DEPENDING ON YOUR PERSPECTIVE... IN TRUE AMBERITE FASHION, THE INEVITABLE OCCURED...

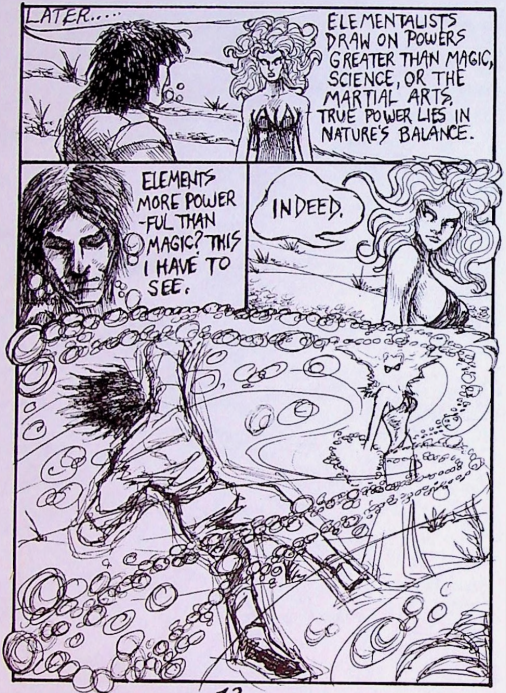
AND MORGAN CAME TO BE. THE 1ST CHILD OF ORDER AND DISSARAY. HIS EXSISTENCE WOULD BE THREATENED BY EITHER SIDE, SO THEY CHOSE A NEUTRAL MENTOR...

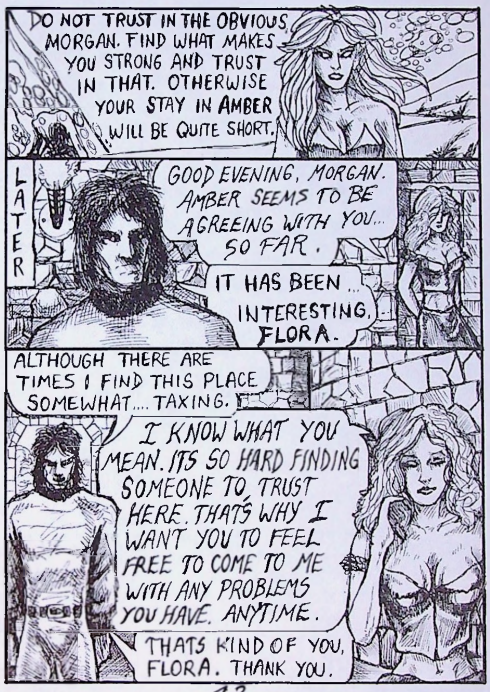
ME. THE LAST PLACE ANYONE WOULD LOOK. CRAZY, HUH!

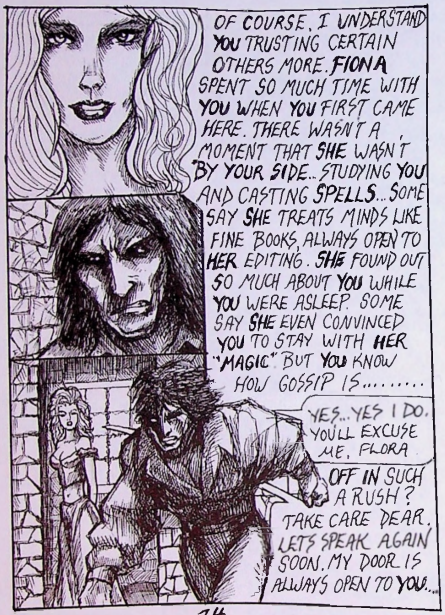
I PLACED HIM IN A CLOSED SHADOW OF MY OWN DESIGN. HE GOT A FAKE I.D., TRAINING IN MAGIC AND DIMENSION HOPPING... ALL FOR THE DAY HE WOULD ARRIVE HERE. HIS EVER FAITHFUL BLANKET, MY EYES AND EARS AT HIS SIDE. AND JUST SO YOU KNOW...

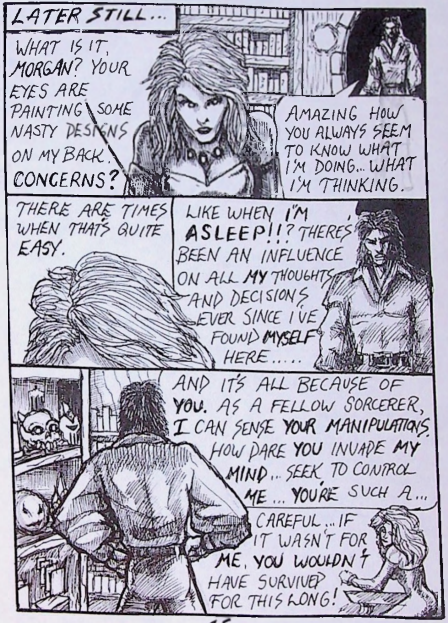
...WHILE WE HAVE BEEN GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER. HE HAS BEEN TRAINING AND GETTING TO KNOW "AMBER." HEH... LETS SEE HOW HE'S PROGRESSING, EH?.....

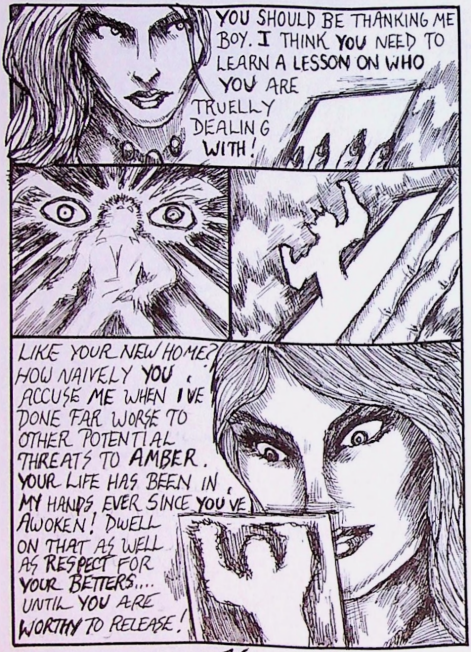

NO BLINK. NO FLINCH. ACTION AND INTENT. YOU ARE LEARNING.
ACTUALLY... I FIGURED THAT LESSONS COULD NOT BE LEARNED BY SOMEONE DEAD.
YOUR SKILLS AND UNDERSTANDING MUST WALK IN STEP. MANY STUDENTS OF MINE HAVE FAILED TO GRASP THIS SIMPLE CONCEPT.
MAY I SPEAK TO ANY OF THEM?
YES....
...IF YOU START DIGGING.

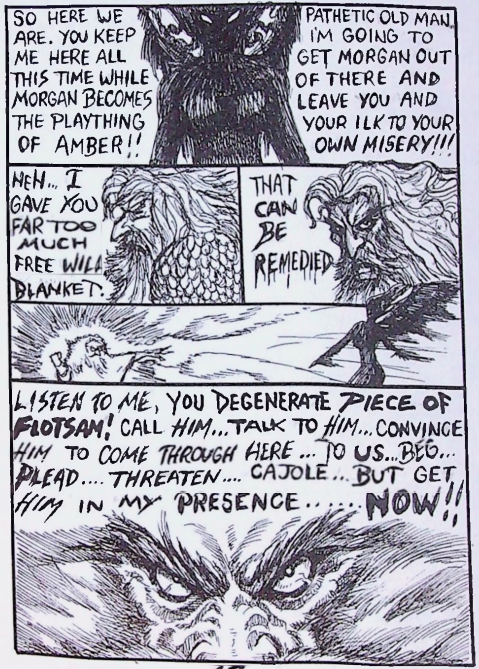

LATER.....
ELEMENTALISTS DRAW ON POWERS GREATER THAN MAGIC, SCIENCE, OR THE MARTIAL ARTS. TRUE POWER LIES IN NATURE'S BALANCE.
ELEMENTS MORE POWER-FUL THAN MAGIC? THIS I HAVE TO SEE.
INDEED.

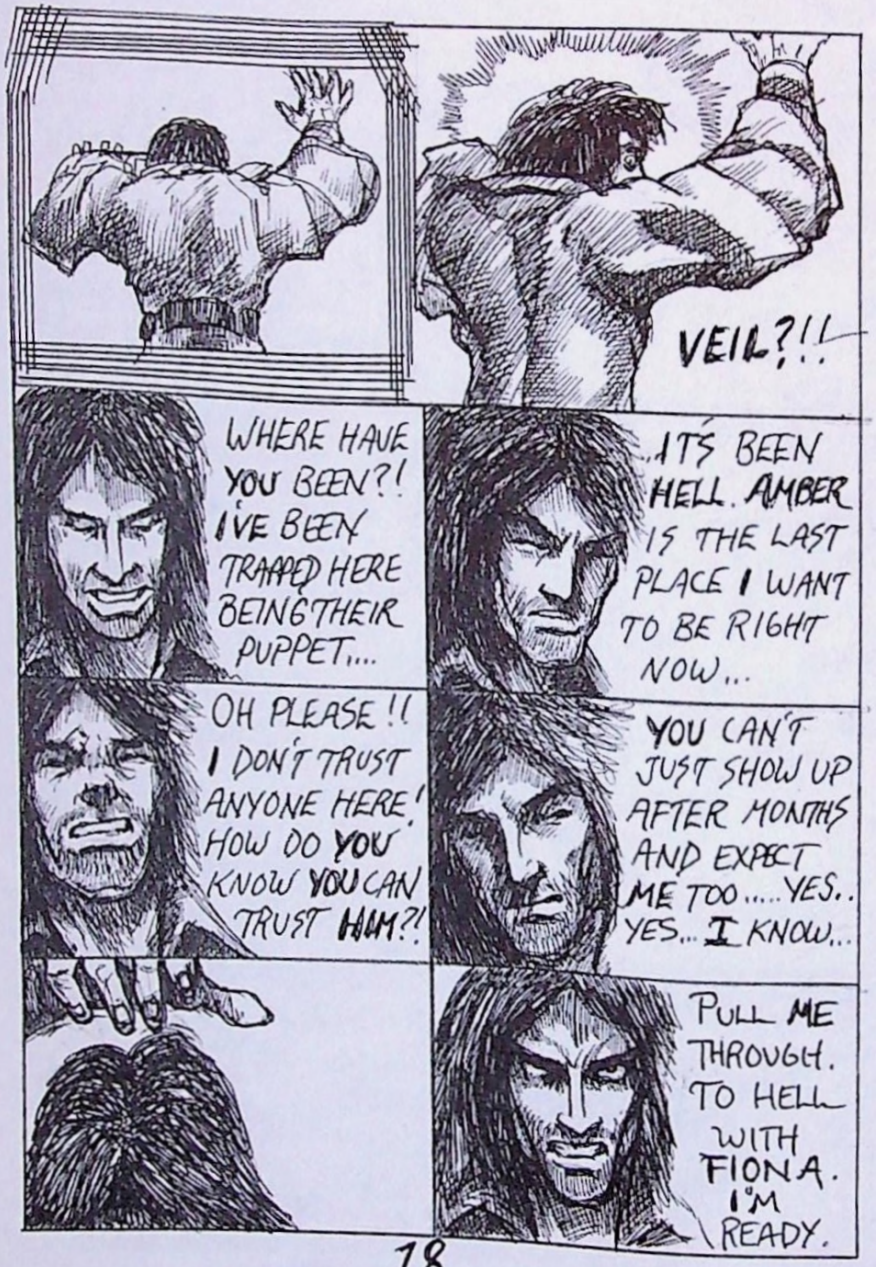

DO NOT TRUST IN THE OBVIOUS MORGAN. FIND WHAT MAKES YOU STRONG AND TRUST IN THAT. OTHERWISE YOUR STAY IN AMBER WILL BE QUITE SHORT.
LATER
GOOD EVENING, MORGAN. AMBER SEEMS TO BE AGREEING WITH YOU... SO FAR.
IT HAS BEEN... INTERESTING, FLORA.
ALTHOUGH THERE ARE TIMES I FIND THIS PLACE SOMEWHAT.... TAXING.
I KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN. ITS SO HARD FINDING SOMEONE TO TRUST HERE. THATS WHY I WANT YOU TO FEEL FREE TO COME TO ME WITH ANY PROBLEMS YOU HAVE. ANYTIME.
THATS KIND OF YOU, FLORA. THANK YOU.

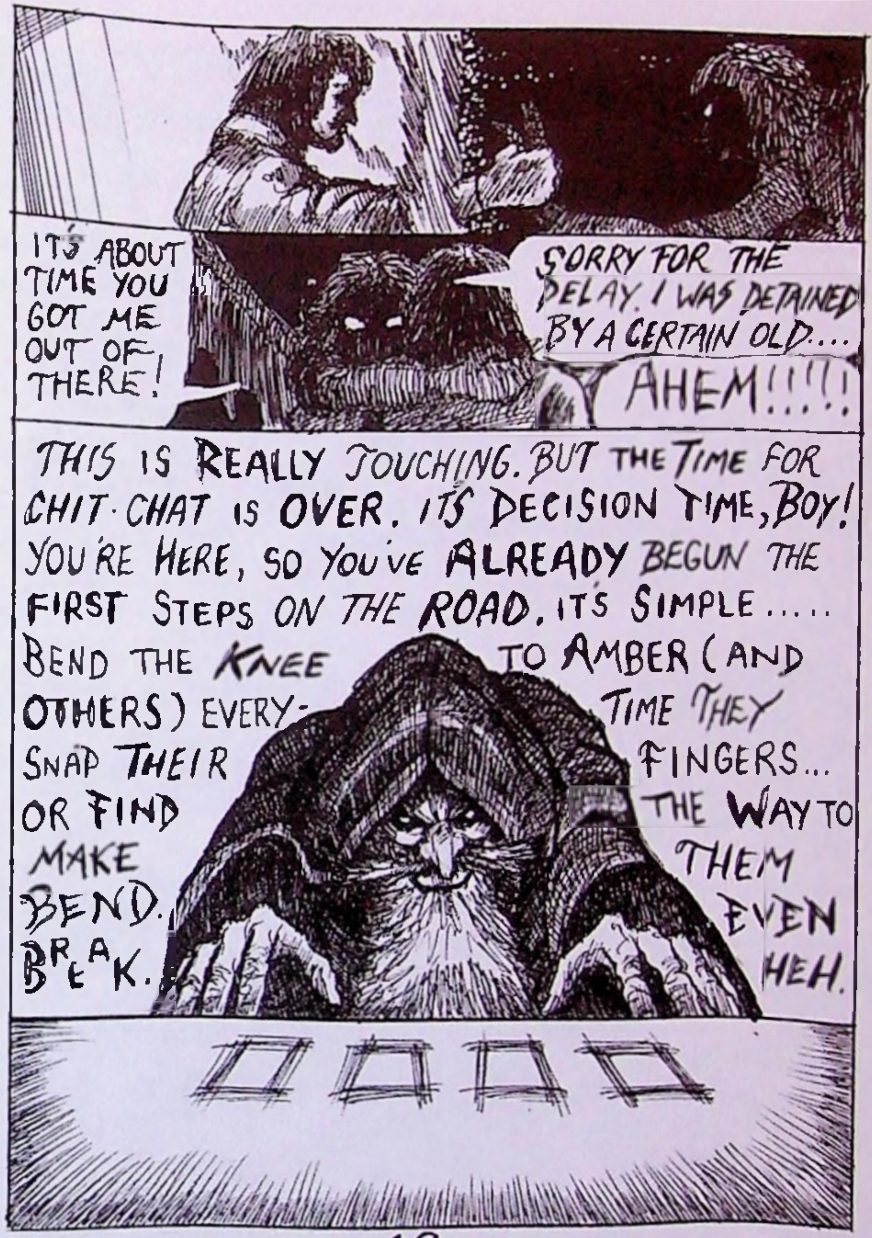

OF COURSE, I UNDERSTAND YOU TRUSTING CERTAIN OTHERS MORE. FIONA SPENT SO MUCH TIME WITH YOU WHEN YOU FIRST CAME HERE. THERE WASN'T A MOMENT THAT SHE WASN'T BY YOUR SIDE... STUDYING YOU AND CASTING SPELLS... SOME SAY SHE TREATS MINDS LIKE FINE BOOKS, ALWAYS OPEN TO HER EDITING. SHE FOUND OUT SO MUCH ABOUT YOU WHILE YOU WERE ASLEEP. SOME SAY SHE EVEN CONVINCED YOU TO STAY WITH HER "MAGIC". BUT YOU KNOW HOW GOSSIP IS.....
YES... YES I DO. YOU'LL EXCUSE ME, FLORA
OFF IN SUCH A RUSH?
TAKE CARE DEAR. LET'S SPEAK AGAIN SOON. MY DOOR IS ALWAYS OPEN TO YOU...

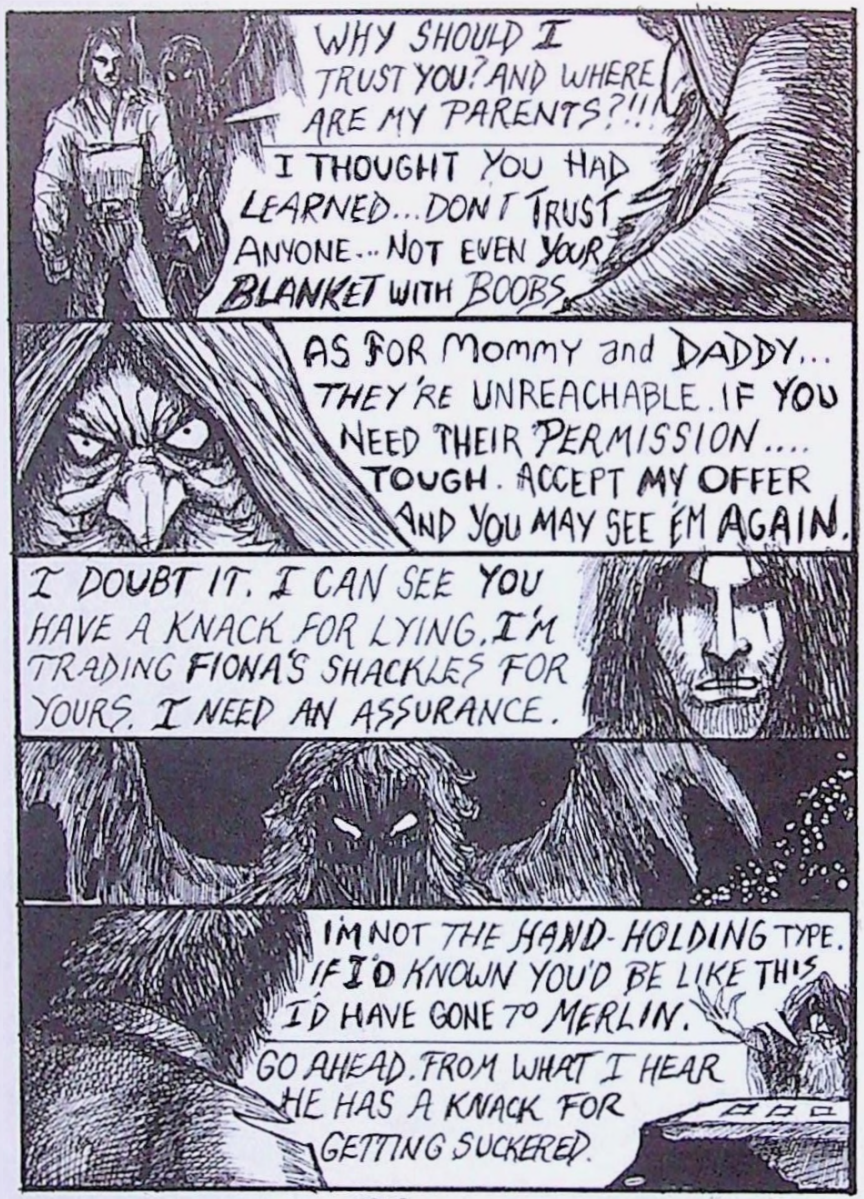

LATER STILL...
WHAT IS IT, MORGAN? YOUR EYES ARE PAINTING SOME NASTY DESIGNS ON MY BACK. CONCERNS?
AMAZING HOW YOU ALWAYS SEEM TO KNOW WHAT I'M DOING... WHAT I'M THINKING.
THERE ARE TIMES WHEN THAT'S QUITE EASY.
LIKE WHEN I'M ASLEEP!!? THERES BEEN AN INFLUENCE ON ALL MY THOUGHTS AND DECISIONS EVER SINCE I'VE FOUND MYSELF HERE.....
AND IT'S ALL BECAUSE OF YOU. AS A FELLOW SORCERER, I CAN SENSE YOUR MANIPULATIONS. HOW DARE YOU INVADE MY MIND... SEEK TO CONTROL ME... YOU'RE SUCH A...
CAREFUL... IF IT WASN'T FOR ME, YOU WOULDN'T HAVE SURVIVED FOR THIS LONG!


YOU SHOULD BE THANKING ME BOY. I THINK YOU NEED TO LEARN A LESSON ON WHO YOU ARE TRUELLY DEALING WITH!
LIKE YOUR NEW HOME? HOW NAIVELY YOU ACCUSE ME WHEN I'VE DONE FAR WORSE TO OTHER POTENTIAL THREATS TO AMBER. YOUR LIFE HAS BEEN IN MY HANDS, EVER SINCE YOU'VE AWOKEN! DWELL ON THAT AS WELL AS RESPECT FOR YOUR BETTERS.... UNTIL YOU ARE WORTHY TO RELEASE!


SO HERE WE ARE. YOU KEEP ME HERE ALL THIS TIME WHILE MORGAN BECOMES THE PLAYTHING OF AMBER!!
PATHETIC OLD MAN. I'M GOING TO GET MORGAN OUT OF THERE AND LEAVE YOU AND YOUR ILK TO YOUR OWN MISERY!!!
MEH... I GAVE YOU FAR TOO MUCH FREE WILL BLANKET.
THAT CAN BE REMEDIED
LISTEN TO ME, YOU DEGENERATE PIECE OF FLOTSAM! CALL HIM... TALK TO HIM... CONVINCE HIM TO COME THROUGH HERE... TO US... BEG... PLEAD.... THREATEN.... CAJOLE... BUT GET HIM IN MY PRESENCE..... NOW!!

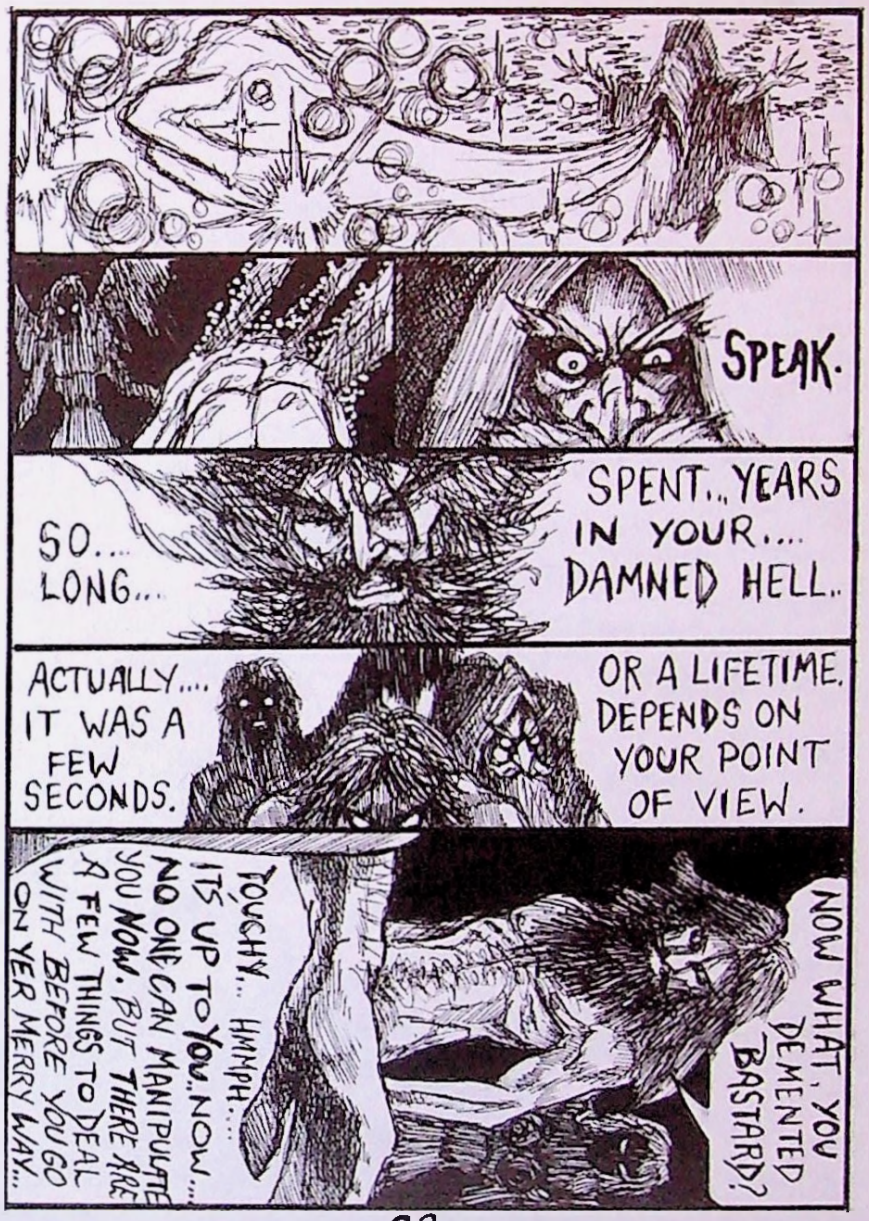

VEIL?!!
WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?! I'VE BEEN TRAPPED HERE BEING THEIR PUPPET....
..IT'S BEEN HELL. AMBER IS THE LAST PLACE I WANT TO BE RIGHT NOW...
OH PLEASE!! I DON'T TRUST ANYONE HERE! HOW DO YOU KNOW YOU CAN TRUST HIM?!
YOU CAN'T JUST SHOW UP AFTER MONTHS AND EXPECT ME TOO..... YES.. YES... I KNOW...
PULL ME THROUGH. TO HELL WITH FIONA. I'M READY.


IT'S ABOUT TIME YOU GOT ME OUT OF THERE!
SORRY FOR THE DELAY. I WAS DETAINED BY A CERTAIN OLD...
AHEM!!!!!
THIS IS REALLY TOUCHING. BUT THE TIME FOR CHIT-CHAT IS OVER. IT'S DECISION TIME, BOY! YOU'RE HERE, SO YOU'VE ALREADY BEGUN THE FIRST STEPS ON THE ROAD. IT'S SIMPLE..... BEND THE KNEE TO AMBER (AND OTHERS) EVERY-TIME THEY SNAP THEIR FINGERS... OR FIND THE WAY TO MAKE THEM BEND. BREAK. EVEN HEH.

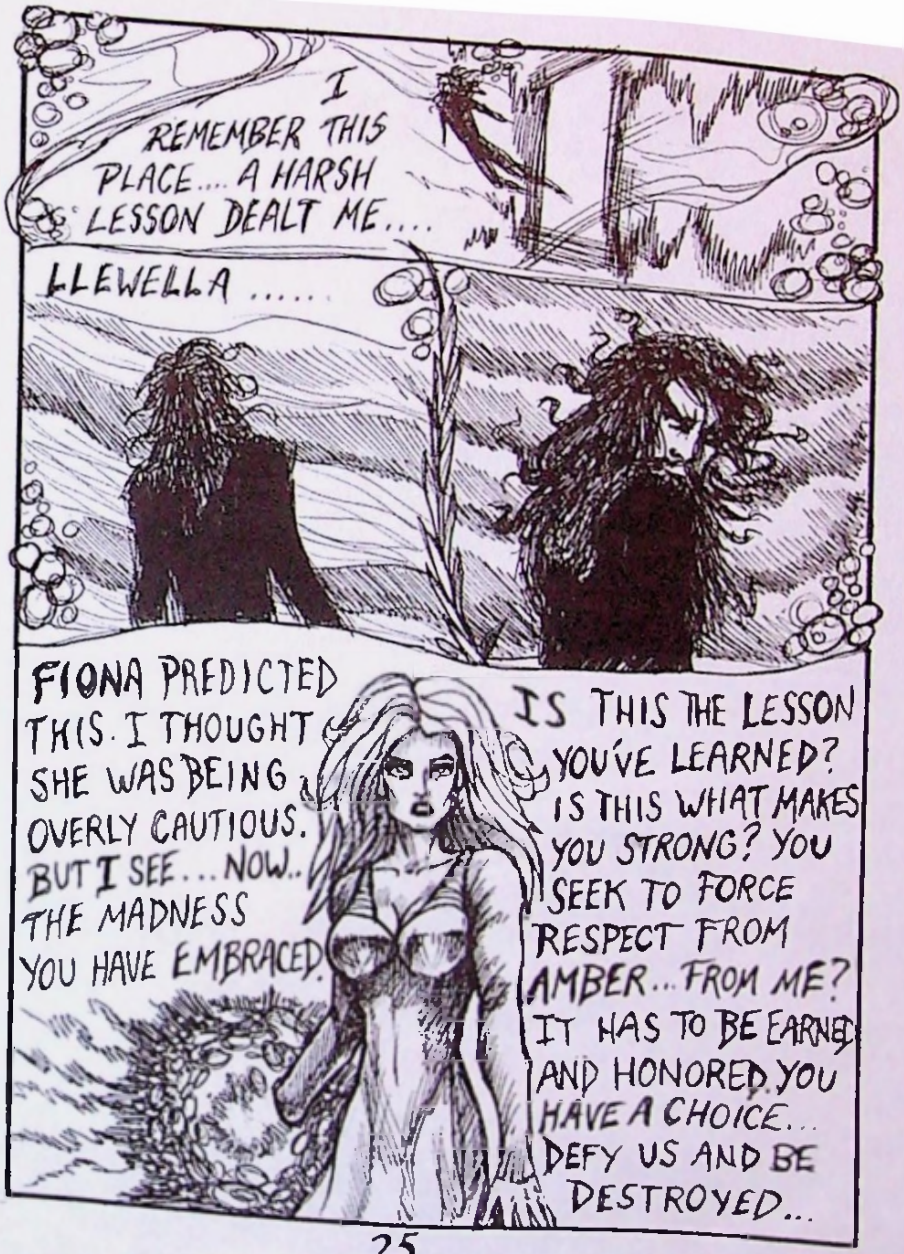

WHY SHOULD I TRUST YOU? AND WHERE ARE MY PARENTS?!!
I THOUGHT YOU HAD LEARNED... DON'T TRUST ANYONE... NOT EVEN YOUR BLANKET WITH BOOBS.
AS FOR MOMMY and DADDY... THEY'RE UNREACHABLE. IF YOU NEED THEIR PERMISSION.... TOUGH. ACCEPT MY OFFER AND YOU MAY SEE 'EM AGAIN.
I DOUBT IT. I CAN SEE YOU HAVE A KNACK FOR LYING. I'M TRADING FIONA'S SHACKLES FOR YOURS. I NEED AN ASSURANCE.
I'M NOT THE HAND-HOLDING TYPE. IF I'D KNOWN YOU'D BE LIKE THIS I'D HAVE GONE TO MERLIN.
GO AHEAD. FROM WHAT I HEAR HE HAS A KNACK FOR GETTING SUCKERED.

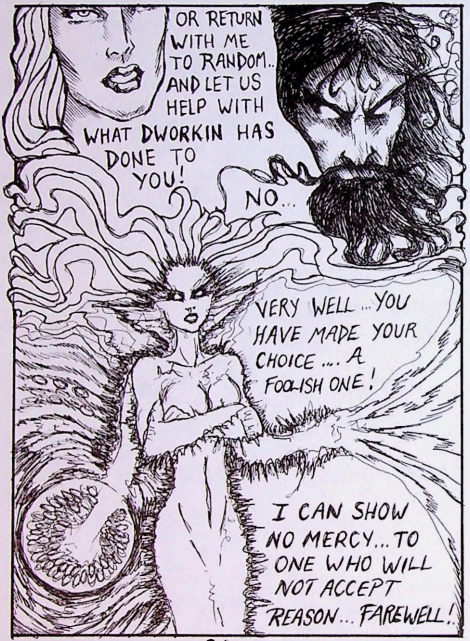
SIGH WHAT DO YOU WANT?
VEIL GOES FREE IF I.....
DONE. MAY WE PROCEED NOW?
..... YES ..
FINE.. HERE IT COMES. HOPE YER NOT SQEAMISH, BOY.
STEP RIGHT IN! NO ONE HAS EVER COME BACK BEFORE. YOU MAY SURVIVE.. YER SANITY IS OPTIONAL!
MORGAN.. I ....
GET HIM FOR ME IF I DON'T COME BACK!

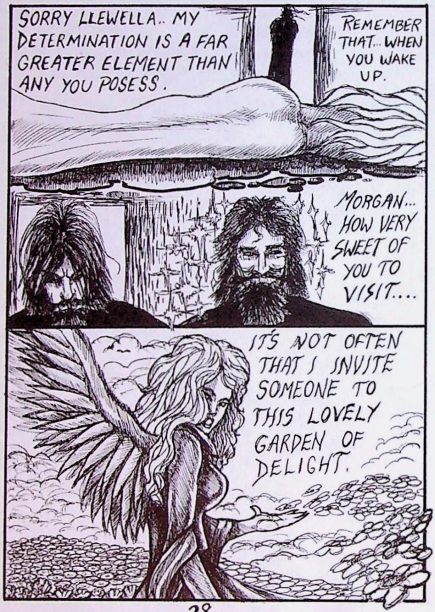
AND NOW WE WAIT.
FOR HOW LONG?
HE ACTUALLY... SURVIVED!
WHERE CHAOS AND AMBER MEET!
HE'S... AGH!.. POWERFUL....
KNEW HE WOULD! RRRR....
FORCING HIS WAY... OUT!!!

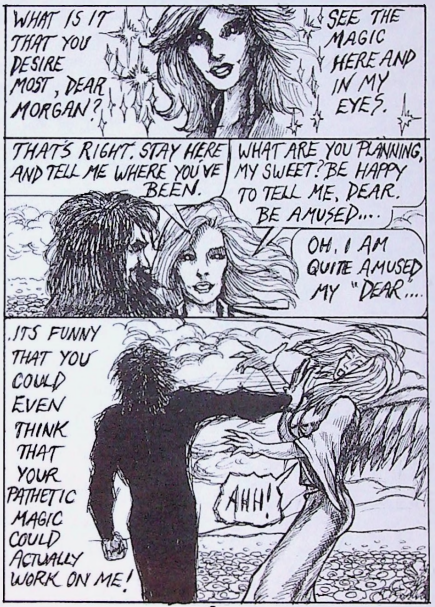

SPEAK.
SO... LONG...
SPENT... YEARS IN YOUR.... DAMNED HELL..
ACTUALLY.... IT WAS A FEW SECONDS.
OR A LIFETIME. DEPENDS ON YOUR POINT OF VIEW.
TOUCHY... HMMPH.... IT'S UP TO YOU NOW... NO ONE CAN MANIPULATE YOU NOW. BUT THERE ARE A FEW THINGS TO DEAL WITH BEFORE YOU GO ON YER MERRY WAY..
NOW WHAT, YOU DEMENTED BASTARD?

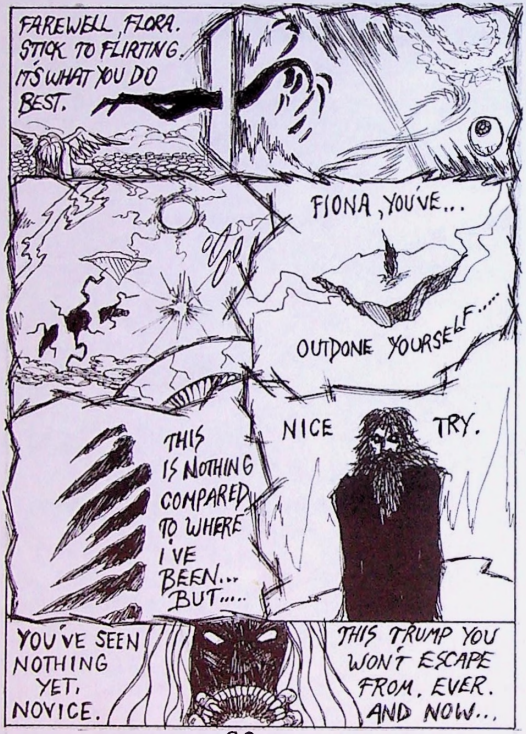
THESE TRUMPS WILL TAKE YOU TO YOUR INSTRUCTORS
FACE THEM ALL. SURPASS THEIR LESSONS. THEN GO WHERE YOU WILL.
TO ME, VEIL.
ONE DAY, DWORKIN...
...ONE DAY....
THAT'S WHAT I'M COUNTING ON, BOY....
...I'LL SEE YOU PAY FOR EVERYTHING YOU'VE DONE!

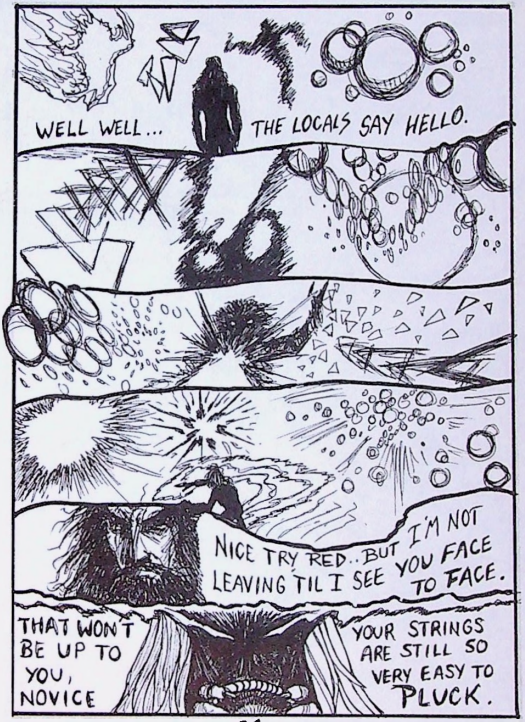

I REMEMBER THIS PLACE.... A HARSH LESSON DEALT ME....
LLEWELLA .....
FIONA PREDICTED THIS. I THOUGHT SHE WAS BEING OVERLY CAUTIOUS. BUT I SEE... NOW.. THE MADNESS YOU HAVE EMBRACED.
IS THIS THE LESSON YOU'VE LEARNED? IS THIS WHAT MAKES YOU STRONG? YOU SEEK TO FORCE RESPECT FROM AMBER... FROM ME? IT HAS TO BE EARNED AND HONORED. YOU HAVE A CHOICE... DEFY US AND BE DESTROYED...


OR RETURN WITH ME TO RANDOM.. AND LET US HELP WITH WHAT DWORKIN HAS DONE TO YOU!
NO...
VERY WELL ... YOU HAVE MADE YOUR CHOICE .... A FOOLISH ONE!
I CAN SHOW NO MERCY... TO ONE WHO WILL NOT ACCEPT REASON... FAREWELL!

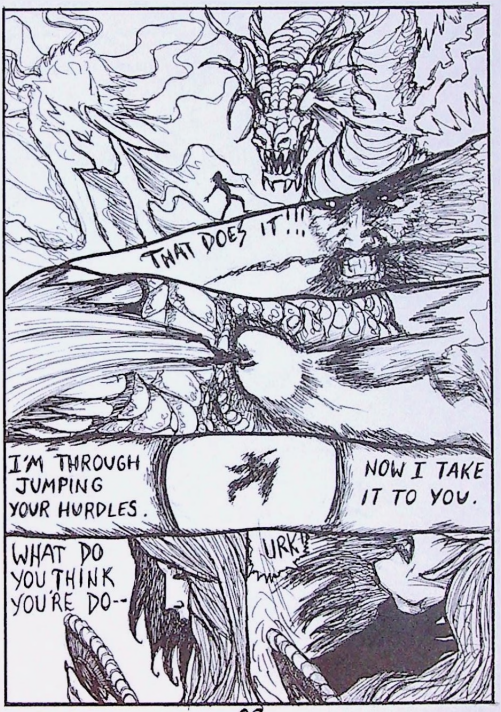

SORRY LLEWELLA.. MY DETERMINATION IS A FAR GREATER ELEMENT THAN ANY YOU POSESS.
REMEMBER THAT.. WHEN YOU WAKE UP.
MORGAN... HOW VERY SWEET OF YOU TO VISIT....
IT'S NOT OFTEN THAT I INVITE SOMEONE TO THIS LOVELY GARDEN OF DELIGHT.


WHAT IS IT THAT YOU DESIRE MOST, DEAR MORGAN?
SEE THE MAGIC HERE AND IN MY EYES.
THAT'S RIGHT. STAY HERE AND TELL ME WHERE YOU'VE BEEN.
WHAT ARE YOU PLANNING, MY SWEET? BE HAPPY TO TELL ME, DEAR. BE AMUSED....
OH, I AM QUITE AMUSED MY "DEAR"...
ITS FUNNY THAT YOU COULD EVEN THINK THAT YOUR PATHETIC MAGIC COULD ACTUALLY WORK ON ME!
AHH!

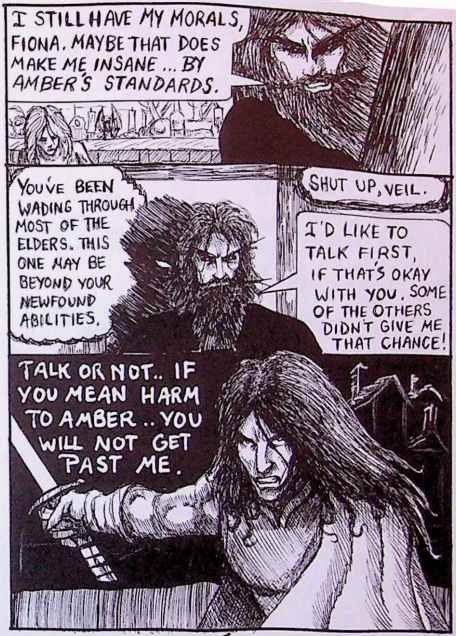

FAREWELL, FLORA. STICK TO FLIRTING. IT'S WHAT YOU DO BEST.
FIONA, YOU'VE...
OUTDONE YOURSELF....
NICE TRY.
THIS IS NOTHING COMPARED TO WHERE I'VE BEEN... BUT.....
YOU'VE SEEN NOTHING YET, NOVICE.
THIS TRUMP YOU WON'T ESCAPE FROM. EVER. AND NOW...

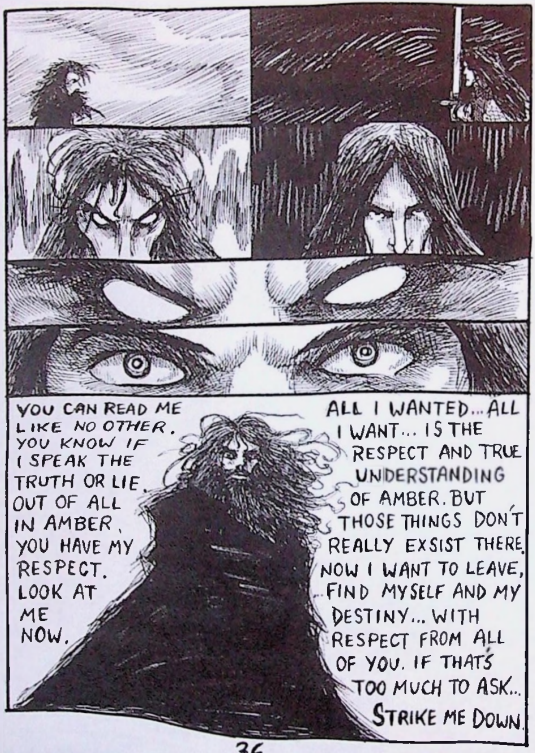

WELL WELL...
THE LOCALS SAY HELLO.
NICE TRY RED.. BUT I'M NOT LEAVING TIL I SEE YOU FACE TO FACE.
THAT WON'T BE UP TO YOU, NOVICE
YOUR STRINGS ARE STILL SO VERY EASY TO PLUCK.

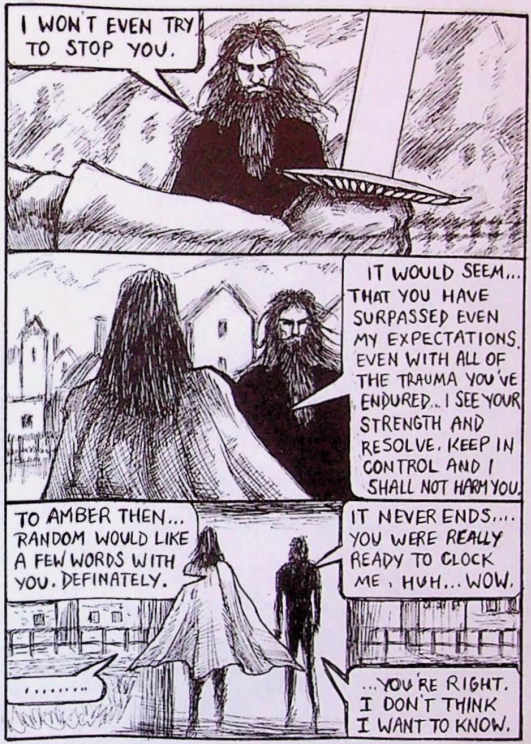
THIS WON'T DO YOU ANY GOOD, WITCH.
YOU ARE A RESILIENT LITTLE CUSS, AREN'T YOU, MORGAN.
HANG ON FOOL. THIS RIDE IS ABOUT TO GET REAL BUMPY.

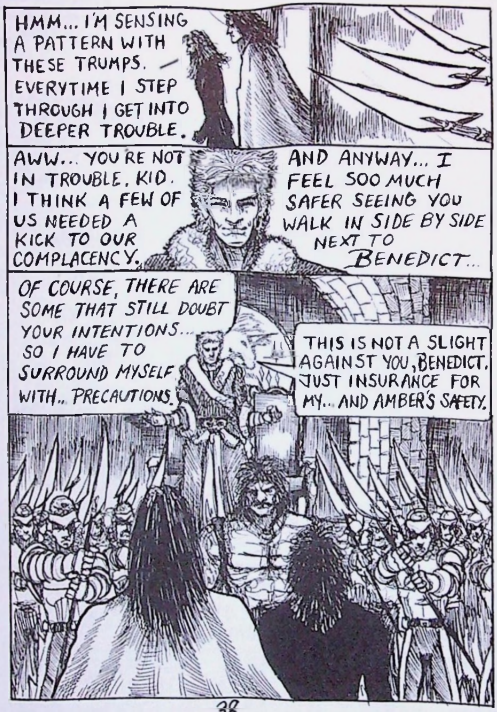

THAT DOES IT!!!
I'M THROUGH JUMPING YOUR HURDLES.
NOW I TAKE IT TO YOU.
WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DO--
URK!

I'LL BET THERE'S A LOT OF YOUR FORMER STUDENTS THAT WOULD LIKE TO BE ME RIGHT NOW.
ANY LAST WORDS, DEAR AUNT?
KNEW YOU'D... DO THIS.... AHGH.. YOU'RE NOTHING BUT... MADNESS.. POWER AND NO.. UNDERSTANDING... YOU... WON'T SURVIVE.. LONG PAST ME... KILL ME... AND... UHG. PROOVE MY.. POINT...
NOT TODAY, FIONA...
..YOU AND AMBER DESERVE EACH OTHER.

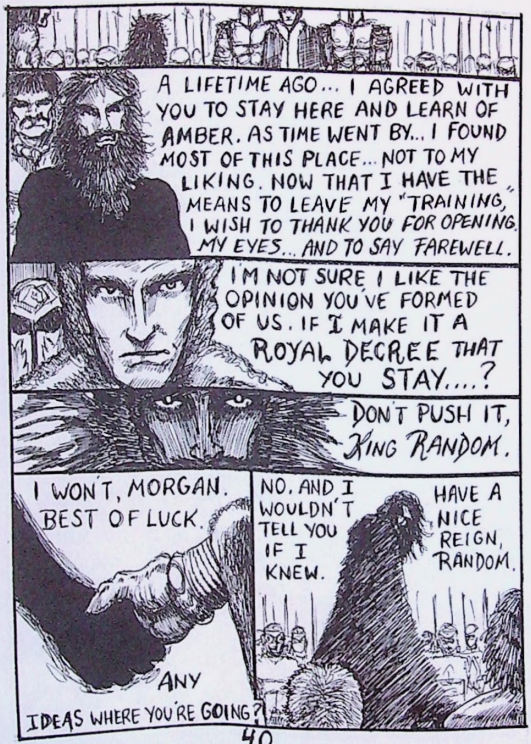

I STILL HAVE MY MORALS, FIONA. MAYBE THAT DOES MAKE ME INSANE ... BY AMBER'S STANDARDS.
SHUT UP, VEIL.
YOU'VE BEEN WADING THROUGH MOST OF THE ELDERS. THIS ONE MAY BE BEYOND YOUR NEWFOUND ABILITIES.
I'D LIKE TO TALK FIRST, IF THAT'S OKAY WITH YOU. SOME OF THE OTHERS DIDN'T GIVE ME THAT CHANCE!
TALK OR NOT.. IF YOU MEAN HARM TO AMBER .. YOU WILL NOT GET PAST ME.

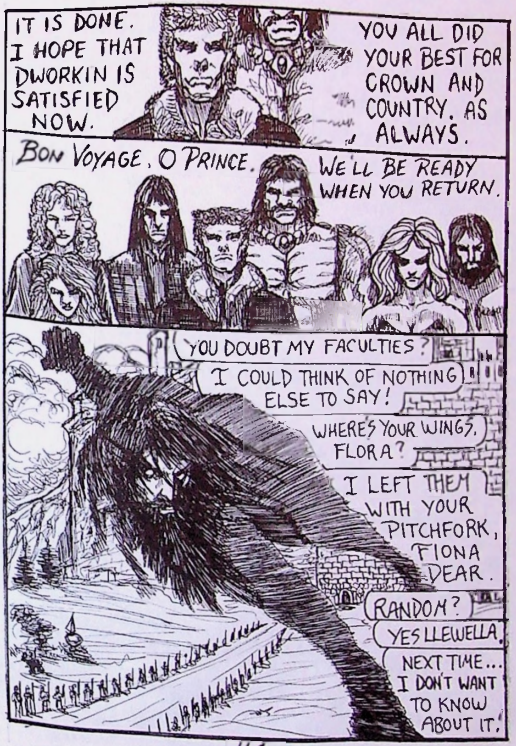

YOU CAN READ ME LIKE NO OTHER. YOU KNOW IF I SPEAK THE TRUTH OR LIE. OUT OF ALL IN AMBER, YOU HAVE MY RESPECT. LOOK AT ME NOW.
ALL I WANTED... ALL I WANT... IS THE RESPECT AND TRUE UNDERSTANDING OF AMBER. BUT THOSE THINGS DON'T REALLY EXSIST THERE. NOW I WANT TO LEAVE, FIND MYSELF AND MY DESTINY... WITH RESPECT FROM ALL OF YOU. IF THAT'S TOO MUCH TO ASK... STRIKE ME DOWN

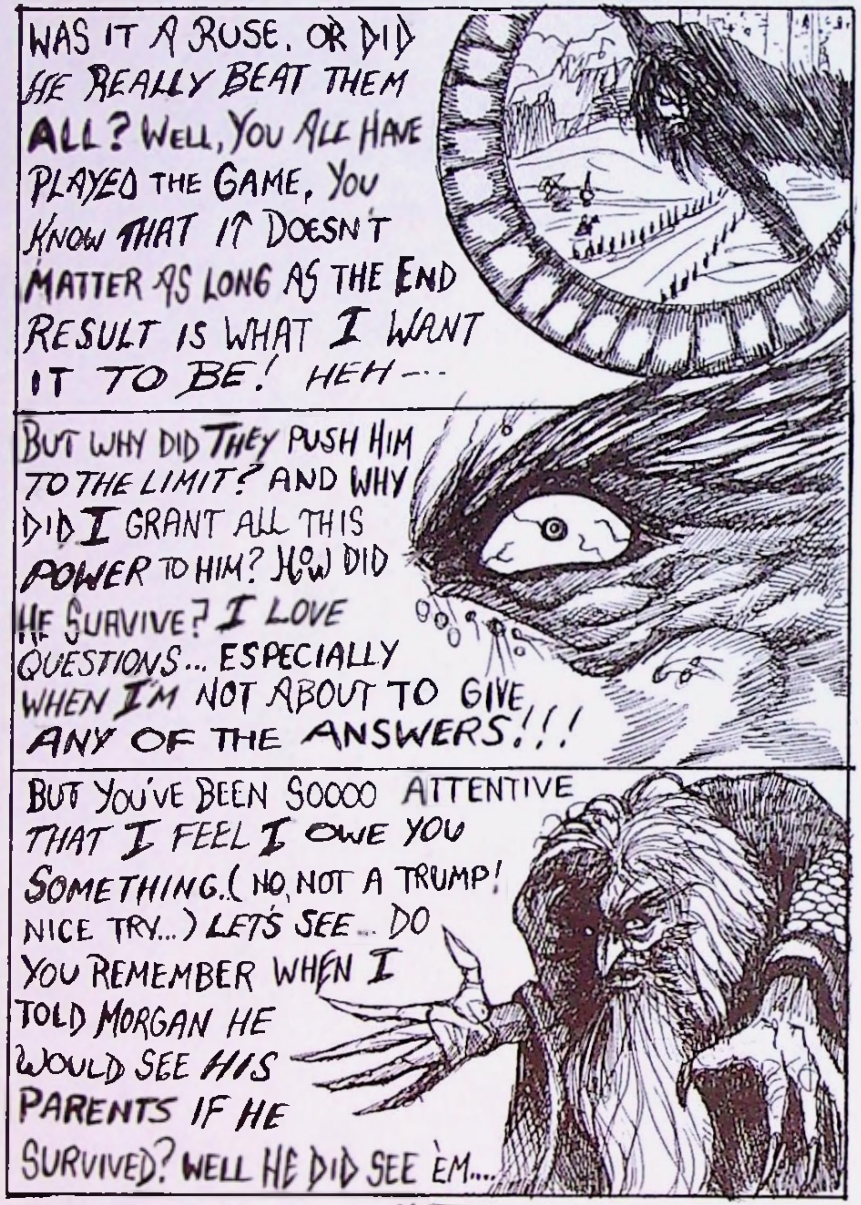

I WON'T EVEN TRY TO STOP YOU.
IT WOULD SEEM... THAT YOU HAVE SURPASSED EVEN MY EXPECTATIONS, EVEN WITH ALL OF THE TRAUMA YOU'VE ENDURED... I SEE YOUR STRENGTH AND RESOLVE. KEEP IN CONTROL AND I SHALL NOT HARM YOU.
TO AMBER THEN... RANDOM WOULD LIKE A FEW WORDS WITH YOU. DEFINATELY.
IT NEVER ENDS.... YOU WERE REALLY READY TO CLOCK ME, HUH... WOW.
.....
...YOU'RE RIGHT. I DON'T THINK I WANT TO KNOW.


HMM... I'M SENSING A PATTERN WITH THESE TRUMPS. EVERYTIME I STEP THROUGH I GET INTO DEEPER TROUBLE.
AWW... YOU'RE NOT IN TROUBLE, KID. I THINK A FEW OF US NEEDED A KICK TO OUR COMPLACENCY.
AND ANYWAY... I FEEL SOO MUCH SAFER SEEING YOU WALK IN SIDE BY SIDE NEXT TO BENEDICT...
OF COURSE, THERE ARE SOME THAT STILL DOUBT YOUR INTENTIONS... SO I HAVE TO SURROUND MYSELF WITH... PRECAUTIONS.
THIS IS NOT A SLIGHT AGAINST YOU, BENEDICT. JUST INSURANCE FOR MY... AND AMBER'S SAFETY.

I TAKE NO OFFENSE AT YOUR CAUTION. AS A SHOW OF AMBER'S GOOD FAITH... ALL OF YOUR "INSURANCE POLICIES" SHOULD STAND DOWN. NOW.
HEY, IM JUST THE KING. WHY SHOULD I DICTATE POLICY OR ANYTHING?
STAND DOWN. EVEN THOUGH THE KING'S STANDARD BEARS MY SYMBOL... I'VE LEARNED TO TRUST BENEDICT.
I DON'T!
YOU TRUST HIM, BENEDICT? FINE. BUT AFTER WE TAKE HIM IN, HE DECIDES TO EMBRACE MADNESS AND ATTACK US. I HAVE SERIOUS PROBLEMS WITH YOUR FACULTIES, BENEDICT.
CAREFUL, BIG GUY. HE'S THE ONLY ONE SAVING YOU FROM ME RIGHT NOW.
IN YOUR DREAMS!
IN ANY SHADOW YOU LIKE... BE NICE WHILE I HAVE A WORD WITH THE KING.


A LIFETIME AGO... I AGREED WITH YOU TO STAY HERE AND LEARN OF AMBER. AS TIME WENT BY... I FOUND MOST OF THIS PLACE... NOT TO MY LIKING. NOW THAT I HAVE THE MEANS TO LEAVE MY "TRAINING," I WISH TO THANK YOU FOR OPENING MY EYES... AND TO SAY FAREWELL.
I'M NOT SURE I LIKE THE OPINION YOU'VE FORMED OF US. IF I MAKE IT A ROYAL DECREE THAT YOU STAY....?
DON'T PUSH IT, KING RANDOM.
I WON'T, MORGAN. BEST OF LUCK.
NO. AND I WOULDN'T TELL YOU IF I KNEW.
HAVE A NICE REIGN, RANDOM.
ANY IDEAS WHERE YOU'RE GOING?


IT IS DONE. I HOPE THAT DWORKIN IS SATISFIED NOW.
YOU ALL DID YOUR BEST FOR CROWN AND COUNTRY, AS ALWAYS.
BON VOYAGE, O PRINCE.
WE'LL BE READY WHEN YOU RETURN.
YOU DOUBT MY FACULTIES?
I COULD THINK OF NOTHING ELSE TO SAY!
WHERE'S YOUR WINGS, FLORA?
I LEFT THEM WITH YOUR PITCHFORK, FIONA DEAR.
RANDOM?
YES LLEWELLA.
NEXT TIME... I DON'T WANT TO KNOW ABOUT IT.


WAS IT A BLUFF, OR DID HE REALLY BEAT THEM ALL? WELL, YOU ALL HAVE PLAYED THE GAME, YOU KNOW THAT IT DOESN'T MATTER AS LONG AS THE END RESULT IS WHAT I WANT IT TO BE! HEH--
BUT WHY DID THEY PUSH HIM TO THE LIMIT? AND WHY DID I GRANT ALL THIS POWER TO HIM? HOW DID HE SURVIVE? I LOVE QUESTIONS... ESPECIALLY WHEN I'M NOT ABOUT TO GIVE ANY OF THE ANSWERS!!!
BUT YOU'VE BEEN SOOOO ATTENTIVE THAT I FEEL I OWE YOU SOMETHING. (NO, NOT A TRUMP! NICE TRY...) LET'S SEE... DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN I TOLD MORGAN HE WOULD SEE HIS PARENTS IF HE SURVIVED? WELL HE DID SEE 'EM...

...AND BOTH OF THEM... BOTH OF ME.... WISH HIM THE BEST OF LUCK!!!!
THANK YOU ERICK! (FOR THE HELLRIDE!) THANK YOU MICHAEL! (FOR THE PATIENCE!) SORRY FOR THE WAIT! THANK YOU ALL!
FINIS
K '04

I grade myself.

At the end of a convention, I make a list of what I have done, as a Game Master, as a speaker, or as an organizer. For each event I try to assign an honest grade. C+, D, B-, and the occasional A. October, 2003, at Necronomicon, in Sydney, Australia, I gave myself a rare A+. Every F is an open wound, still painful to the touch.

After that, I come up with an average. I'll add up all the scores, on a four-point scale, and divide by the number of events. The result is my score, my performance, my attempt at self-improvement.

Looking back over the years, I still remember the conventions, but I don't remember the numbers. It's the friends I remember.

The joy of meeting old friends, and the pure delight in discovering new friends, that's what I remember. Both the friends of the flesh, of this world, and also the equally wonderful player character friends, the ghosts who grace my role-playing sessions.

Sometime in the near future, I'll make another little list, based on my output as a publisher. It will start with the first rulebook, and end with the volume you hold in your hands. For each book I'll write a grade. It will be a bit longer than you might expect, since I'll also include the books that should have been, and were not, phantasms that will do a sad thing to the average.

As with other things, it's not the score that will matter.

As with other things, what matters are the friends I have made. Friends I have met and touched and dined with. Friends I have known through telephone calls or letters or e-mail.

What made this endeavor so wonderful are the friends we've created together. Characters that are a fusion of our minds, and a part of the living dream of our friend Roger Zelazny.

Thank you, my friends.

Thank you, Roger.

Erick Wujcik
January, 2005

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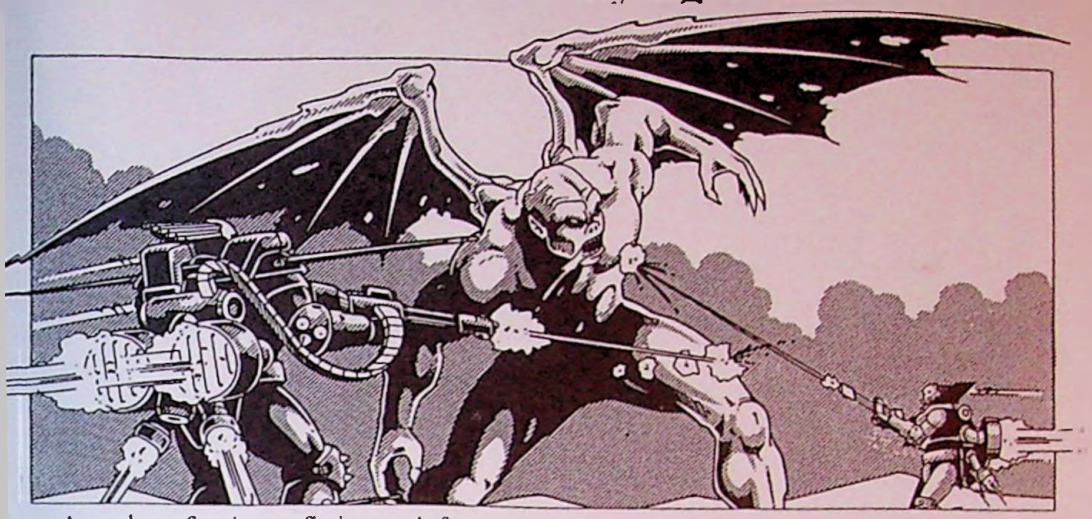

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